Mr. Ramosi

by

Valentine Williams

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MR. RAMOSI

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By

VALENTINE WILLIAMS

Author of 'The Man with the Club Foot,' 'Clubfoot The Avenger,' 'The Three of Clubs,' 'The Red Mass, etc.

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CONTENTS

I. At the Villa Scarabée 3

II. Mr. Ramosi 12

III. In which Mr. Seaton Makes a Discovery 21

IV. The Man in D7 31

V. Said Hussein 42

VI. A Cry in the Night 55

VII. In which Jean Averil Proves herself a Woman 66

VIII. Mr. Bastable has a Caller 79

IX. The Café of the Persian Pipes 91

X. In which Jean Averil Hears a Story 100

XI. The Song of Bamba 110

XII. Luxor 123

XIII. The Passage by the Mosque 137

XIV. The Statuette of Anubis 149

XV. A Footfall on the Verandah 158

XVI. The Man who Sought a Friend 170

XVII. The Knife at the Shutter 179

XVIII. The Vigil 188

XIX. Sheikh Abdullah 199

XX. Mr. Simonou's Mission 215

XXI. The Woman on the Balcony 226

XXII. Demonstrating that a Door may be both shut and open 234

XXIII. The Woman who Feared to Love 244

XXIV. The Proof 257

XXV. Wherein Jean Averil goes Walking with Romance 267

XXVI. To Dinner at La Bocca 275

XXVII. The Trap 284

XXVIII. The Reckoning 292

XXIX. '. . . Like Sunshine after Rain' 304

MR. RAMOSI

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CHAPTER I

AT THE VILLA SCARABÉE

With a roar from its open exhaust like the clamour of an approaching cyclone, the great white car sped rushing through the night. Before it opened, funnel-shape, the straight French road edged with tall poplars that, in the steady glare of the four dazzling lights, were seen to bend and writhe and shake before the tremendous lashing of the rain.

In its wake was a world of blackness, of confused noises whirled on by the wind of its passage, the rustle of the trees, the sharp flapping of a side curtain, the hiss of water flung upward in a high-curving spray as the Lancia, trembling and straining like a live thing, plunged headlong on its course. The driving-glass was aswim; and in the brightness of the side lamps the beating rain gleamed fitfully like a lambent line of bayonets.

Not a soul stirred, not a dog barked, on the endless road. Above the cry of the storm resounded, loud and clear and insistent like a challenge to the slumbering countryside, the high-pitched hammering of the engine. Its thrumming clove the darkness on a note unchanged save when the passage of the car beneath bridge or over culvert or through the shuttered silence of a sleeping village awoke a thousand echoes to leap up in vain pursuit of the intruder.

It was a black night. Moon and stars were hid by drifting wrack; and the lowering sky seemed to press down upon the very crests of the flying lines of trees. The Lancia thundered forward in a narrow patch of brilliant light that showed a vista of tossing branches, of darkly gleaming road.

At the wheel a crouching, begoggled figure bounded and trembled to the motion, hands lightly resting on the dancing circle, eyes fixed on the yellow blur ahead. There was a man in front beside the driver and two more muffled shapes were visible in the tonneau; but they did not speak or move. Thus for many hours these four had travelled through the storm, as silent, as impersonal, as the blankly lifeless countryside about them.

But now the engine's voice droned lower, the speed decreased, and the big white car rocked and swayed hesitatingly, as it were, over the pot-holes of the *chaussée.*

'We turn off here,' said the driver in English. '*Dio mio,* did one ever see such a night? Have the goodness, Signor Seaton, to wipe a little the glass. It's as dark as the gate of hell under the trees, *maledetto!*'

With the soft jar of smoothly changed gears the Lancia swung round and carefully began to nose its way up the incline of a side road. A thick voice spoke from the back of the car.

'Most there, eh, Mr. Lucca?'

'Sure, Mr. Aronfels!'

'Thank the Lord for that! Me and Mr. Ismail is nigh frozen back here.'

'It's a perishing night,' remarked the man beside the driver, speaking over his shoulder. 'I hope to Heaven Simonou's got some whisky.'

'Amen to that!' rejoined the voice from the tonneau fervently; and the party relapsed into silence.

The car was clambering stolidly up a narrow lane lined with dripping trees whose branches all but formed an arch overhead. The air was dank and raw: the darkness intense. On the right a white gate that stood open between two granite pillars seemed to step suddenly into the beam of the headlights and the car turned in. 'Villa Scarabée' was the name on the posts.

A gravelled drive wound its way steeply up a precipitate slope dotted with tossing palms and pines. The lamps showed beds of bright-hued flowers set at intervals in the stretch of emerald turf between. Unexpectedly out of the Stygian blackness ahead a blurred light winked through the rain, and presently, in the brightness of the Lancia's beam, a white house with green shutters stood disclosed.

The car stopped. With a suddenness that was almost painful the steady throb of the engine was stilled. A door opened and a gush of yellow radiance poured from the dark house upon the mud-splashed car. It had halted at a porch beneath which, silhouetted against the light, a man in evening dress was standing.

'So there you are at last!' was his greeting. 'He's been here since nine o'clock waiting for you! Good-evening, Seaton, I'm delighted to see you. And you, too, Mr. Aronfels. *Enchanté de vous revoir, mon cher Ismail. E questo, caro Lucca!*'

Each and severally he hailed the four travellers as, muffled up in their heavy overcoats, they descended stiffly from the car.

'Gee!' ejaculated Mr. Aronfels, whom the porch lamp discovered as a stout man with small eyes and a

fat nose. 'That's a fierce run we've had. We're hoping that you've got a drop of something to keep out the wet, Brother Simonou!'

'And none of your damned *mastic!*' put in the man addressed as Seaton. His heavy fur coat had fallen open disclosing the undeniable elegance of his attire and a monocle glittered in his eye.

'Not on your life!' the man in the porch retorted idiomatically. 'I've a case of the finest pre-war whisky inside that wants nothing better than to be drunk. Step right in, gentlemen, and warm yourselves. Leave the car where it is, Lucca. It will come to no harm!'

He was very eager, very *empressé*, smiling a good deal with the assiduity of one who is not too sure of himself. Though he was clean-shaven save for a small moustache, the outline of his beard was so strong that even under the lamp the lower part of his yellowish face looked as though it were barred by a violet shadow.

He led the way into the house and the four men trooped after him. In the dainty white hall, deliciously perfumed by masses of golden mimosa in vases, they left their outdoor things. Presently they were all grouped about a fire of olive logs that hissed in the open hearth of a room off the hall where a table was set for supper.

'I've sent the man to bed,' said their host, 'so I trust that none of you will stand on ceremony. There's a Strasbourg pâté, lobster mayonnaise, a brace of chickens and a ham. You'll find whisky on the buffet, or, if you prefer it, some George Goulet '13 which I've heard highly praised. My dear Seaton, you've been here before: might I ask you to take my place while I run up and let our friend know that you've all arrived?'

He left them crowding round the sideboard. With almost professional dexterity Seaton set about carving thin slices off the ham, Aronfels, in a smart brown suit deftly moulded to the swelling curves of his abundant figure, took charge of the whisky decanter, while the man they called Ismail, wielding a knife in a small brown hand, began to cut bread. Their host found them all at table when, presently, he returned to the dining room. He planted himself in front of the fire, a trail of blue smoke floating upward from the long amber cigarette tube held in his carefully manicured hand, and let his narrow, restless black eyes rove from one to the other of his four guests.

They were an oddly assorted company. Their table manners varied as much as their appearance. Aronfels ate and drank noisily, rooting in his plate like a hog in its trough, cracking jokes and laughing loudly, a mass of animal spirits and energy, while Seaton, his glass in his eye, his set white face impassive, demolished his drumstick of chicken with an air of dainty aloofness. Lucca, who had driven the party, had fastened a napkin under his chin and, his big nose pointed platewards, was shovelling lobster salad into his mouth with the blade of his knife. His complexion was the comparative, as it were, in race pigmentation between the ashen fairness of Seaton at his side and the superlative brownness of Ismail who sat opposite.

At last, with a grunt of repletion, Aronfels pushed back his plate and helped himself to a cigar out of the silver box at his elbow.

'Vell, friend Simonou,' said he, addressing the man at the fireplace, 'there ain't another guy in the business what'd bring *me* all the way from N'York to Cannes to

meet a gink I'd never heard of before. I hope he's got real business to talk, that's all, eh, fellers?'

And he looked round the board.

'I believe that Simonou knows too well where his real interest lies,' observed Seaton, tapping out a cigarette on the richly enamelled back of his gold cigarette-case 'to have brought *me* on a fool's errand from London . . .

He spoke like a well-bred Englishman, but his voice had no timbre. Combined with this the perfect rigidity of his features, which his eye-glass accentuated, gave a rather unpleasant flavour to everything he said.

'And me from Turin, *per Bacco!*' ejaculated Lucca.

'*Rassurez-vous, messieurs,*' said Simonou, holding up his hand for silence; 'you shall have no cause to regret the promptitude with which you have responded to my summons. I am distressed to have had to bring you so far, busy men as you four are, but alas! I had no choice.

'My friend, Mr. Ramosi, is an elusive person with a marked dislike for making plans in advance. I had to avail myself of his fleeting presence on the Riviera to snatch the opportunity for this private meeting at my villa. It was because my friend was so uncertain of his movements — he is a man of great and wide interests; but also — I will be frank with you — because I had to ensure absolute secrecy (for the business we have to discuss is not everybody's affair) that I asked you all to come to Lyons and await further word from me there. That every one of you has honoured me by keeping the rendezvous is a mark of confidence, believe me, that I highly esteem. Mr. Ramosi is upstairs in my study now, and if you will accompany me I shall have much pleasure in presenting you . . .'

He had a smooth voice, soft and caressing as though his throat were permanently oiled. He talked rapidly in excellent English with the sort of undefinable accent peculiar to those who speak several languages fluently, using his hands generously to express his meaning.

'Vait a minute!' interposed Aronfels. 'When I do business I like to know where I'm at. I know you, friend Simonou, and I'll tell the world that, for a man what isn't in the trade regular, there ain't a better judge of Egyptian antikas than what you are. When you cabled to enquire would I meet you on this side to discuss the biggest deal ever put over, did I ask questions? No, sir. I packed my grip and caught the next steamer because I done business with you before and you're all right. But I don't know your friend and, from what these boys tell me, they don't know him either. I'll say I'm acquainted with most of the big guys in the Egyptology line, but this Ramosi has got me guessing. Who is he, anyway?'

The shade of yellow which was the dominant tint of Simonou's face deepened. His restless eyes flickered nervously round the group.

'That question doesn't arise,' he said quickly. 'The only interesting point for you is whether Mr. Ramosi's proposal proves attractive. I stand guarantee that he's able to deliver the goods.'

Seaton's toneless voice cut in.

'All the same,' he remarked, absently fingering his carefully knotted grey silk cravat, 'it would be more regular if we knew something more definite about your pal, Simonou. That he's a friend of yours speaks, no doubt, volumes for his private character: it is not necessarily a certificate of his business integrity. As far as I

am concerned my people in London can't afford to get mixed up with a bunch of Levantine crooks. We've always left that side to you, my friend!'

The words, delivered in his dry, metallic voice, were incredibly insulting. Simonou moistened his lips nervously with his tongue before replying. The Italian forestalled him with a question.

'Ramosi?' he queried. 'What name is this? *Ebraco? Egittiano?*'

For the first time the little brown man spoke.

'Eegeeptian, no!' pronounced Ismail in soft chi-chi English. 'There is a tomb of a noble call' like this at Sheikh Abd El-Qurna; but I know of no modern Eegeeptian with this name.'

'Gentlemen,' said Simonou from the fireplace, 'speculation is the soul of your business. When you have heard Mr. Ramosi's proposition, you can decide to take it or not, as you please. But for the moment gamble on me, knowing that I would not have brought you here unless I was virtually certain that it would result in business.'

The lead was skilful. Aronfels stood up at once, his big body towering at the table.

'I'll take a chance,' he announced. 'Jew or Gyppie, let's take a peek at your buddy, Simonou.'

The others followed the American's example and rose from their chairs.

'*Avanti!*' cried Lucca.

'One word before we go,' Simonou entreated. 'My friend is accustomed to have his own way. He does not like to be crossed. It will be as useless to try to beat him down on the terms he will offer you as to ascertain his real identity. Above all things, I beg of you, do not

try to find out who he is. It would be waste of time' — a look of fear crept into the narrow eyes — 'and dangerous as well!'

There was a moment's awkward silence. Seaton broke it.

'Then Ramosi isn't his real name?' he queried bluntly.

'Let's call it a business pseudonym!" replied Simonou.

And he led the way from the room.

CHAPTER II

MR. RAMOSI

Mauve was the dominant note of the room to which their host brought them.

There was a mauve carpet and heavy mauve curtains, drawn across the windows, muted the noises of the night, the angry lashing of the rain upon the glass and the ceaseless pounding of the Mediterranean. Purple flowers clustered in a great silver bowl that stood upon a desk and there were more in vases set about the room. The light was mauve, too; for a petunia silk shade was draped over the electric reading-lamp which, standing on a small side table, was the only illuminant.

With the light thus screened the room was almost in darkness so that the rows of bookshelves lining the walls seemed to mount to infinity. At one of the shelves a man stood reading. The thick pile carpet hushed the footsteps of his visitors and he was not aware of their presence until the sound of the door closing proclaimed it. Even when he turned to face them, the light was so sparse that, coming from the brightness of the staircase, they could descry little else at first than his black silhouette. Only his right hand was plainly visible as it rested clenched on the table immediately under the rays of the lamp, a long, slim hand thatched with reddish down on the back.

Simonou made the presentations with a certain timorous deference that did not lack impressiveness.

'Mr. Bender Aronfels!'

The American lumbered forward, hand outstretched.

The stranger did not move or reciprocate the gesture. Mr. Aronfels inclined himself gravely.

'Mr. Ramosi,' he repeated in his thick voice, 'glad to know you, sir!'

The other's back was to the dim light. Though Aronfels' shrewd eye was getting used to the obscurity, he found it hard to distinguish the stranger's features. He had a vague impression of dark brown hair rather untidily brushed back from the forehead, horn spectacles with lenses so opaque that they distorted the eyes, a small dark moustache, a set, square-cut figure in neat blue serge.

'Mr. Mortimer Seaton!'

The Englishman nodded unceremoniously. 'How d'you do?' He did not offer his hand.

'Signor Aldo Lucca!'

Effusively the Italian bowed.

'Mr. Ismail!'

The little brown man laid his hand rapidly on his forehead and then on his heart.

'Pray be seated, gentlemen,' said Mr. Ramosi and motioned them all to chairs. Himself he seated at the desk, his face in shadow. He had a resonant voice suggestive of a personality accustomed to command, of a character that might be ruthless. He spoke in English without any sort of accent, although Seaton, who was an accomplished linguist, noted a certain deliberation in the choice of words. 'You deal in Egyptian antiquities. So do I.'

Adjusting his monocle, Seaton looked the speaker over carefully.

'Curious,' he remarked, 'that none of us should have heard your name before.'

'That,' retorted Mr. Ramosi calmly, 'be as it may be. It does not alter the fact which I have just stated. Gentlemen, your operations in our restricted market inconvenience me. That is why I asked Mr. Simonou to arrange this conference.'

Seaton leaned back in his chair. 'Well, I'll be damned!' he ejaculated. With a sudden facial spasm he dropped his glass from his eye, caught it dexterously and fell to polishing it abstractedly on his grey silk handkerchief.

'You are all aware,' Mr. Ramosi proceeded deliberately, 'of the growing difficulty of placing upon the market those rare and beautiful treasures of Egypt's past which your clients would be only too ready to purchase did the supply but equal the demand. Of recent years the situation in Egypt has considerably limited this supply. Am I right?'

'You sure are!' heartily agreed Mr. Aronfels, wagging his head like a bear.

'The Department of Antiquities, in extending its powers, has greatly increased its vigilance. Its aim, of course, is to close those unauthorised channels on which you mainly rely for the replenishment of your stock at a reasonable figure. Even those antiques which, under their licences, foreign excavators were formerly at liberty to sell to the trade are becoming increasingly rare as the Egyptian Government tightens its grip on excavation. The resultant shortage has put up the price of the genuine specimens while giving a tremendous fillip to the faking of antiques. You are faced by this state of things at a time when recent discoveries have strongly stimulated public interest in Egyptology, and not only the connoisseur but also the dilettante is

prepared to pay any sum within reason for the right stuff. Do you agree, Mr. Seaton?'

'Certainly,' drawled the Englishman. 'But what are you going to do about it?'

'I will tell you what I can do. I can set back the clock. I can take you back to the days of Mustapha Aga, that indefatigable dealer, who, as British Consular Agent at Luxor, many years ago supplied the cabinets of the great European collectors with their choicest and most splendid Egyptian treasures . . .'

Seaton tucked his handkerchief in his sleeve, fixed his glass in his eye, and deliberately mustered the speaker.

'Rot!' he remarked very distinctly. 'Someone's been pullin' your leg, my friend. I know all about Mustapha Aga. His age has gone for ever. There's no more uncontrolled diggin' in Egypt nowadays. A native may pinch a scarab from the excavations here and there. But treasures . . . no!'

'I don't profess,' Mr. Ramosi rejoined composedly, 'to be able to revive the golden age of Champollion and Belzoni when all Egypt was an Eldorado for the intelligent prospector. But as long as there's any digging going on, I will undertake to keep you supplied with the pick of the finds. If you gentlemen can produce the purchasers, I can deliver the goods, as Mr. Aronfels here might say.'

'The buyers are there, all right, all right,' Aronfels retorted, his little eyes boring sharply into the other's inscrutable visage, 'but I'm not so sure about your side of the deal.'

Mr. Ramosi raised his long slim hand.

'Mr. Aronfels,' he said evenly, 'last May you paid

fifteen hundred dollars for a string of amethyst beads offered to you by a man called Holt who called at your shop in New York. He told you they had been stolen from the Scottish Society's dig at Deir el-Medina . . .'

'Vait just a minute . . .' Aronfels interrupted, his eyes sparkling angrily.

'They were not,' Mr. Ramosi persisted. 'They came from Deir el-Bahari!'

Seaton laughed a mirthless cackle. 'Dam' good!' he murmured.

'You seem to know all about it, don't you?' muttered the American, glowering

'I ought to,' blandly returned Mr. Ramosi. 'You see I sold that string to Benjamin Holt. He got it for twenty Egyptian pounds; what is that? about a hundred dollars . . .'

'Devilish funny!' chortled Seaton.

'It pleased Mr. Seaton,' continued Mr. Ramosi agreeably, 'to be rather scathing just now at my expense. I fear I have no very high opinion of his judgment. He paid two hundred pounds last season to Madabegh, the Luxor dealer, for a scarab of Queen Hatshepsut . . .'

'I'll back my knowledge of scarabs against any man's,' rejoined Seaton acidly.

'The scarab was unquestionably genuine. I never touch fakes. But . . . two hundred pounds! When Madabegh got it from me for thirty-five . . .'

'I don't believe a word of it!' Seaton declared.

'And you gave at least four times too much,' continued Mr. Ramosi, ignoring the interjection, 'for that canopic jar.'

The Englishman sat up quickly.

'Totnes Four, wasn't it?' said Mr. Ramosi languidly.

'I've forgotten what Madabegh charged you. But I let him have it for eight pounds ten!'

The others laughed, Mr. Aronfels the loudest.

'Gentlemen,' said Mr. Ramosi when the laughter had subsided, 'you are ruining the market. My organisation throughout the excavation centres of Egypt is perfect. I will not have outsiders butting in and spoiling prices with the natives. I am not out to supply the connoisseur alone. The dilettante is my mark. What does he want? Chipped ushabtis, ragged papyrus? No. He is looking out for the beautiful, the artistic, jewellery, gold statuettes, Egyptian glaze, alabaster jars. You are all in a big way of business. You know, as well as I do, what your millionaire clients are after. I can supply it and cut out the middleman. I have my distributing agents already, but I am willing to take you into the ring.'

The smile had left Mr. Aronfels' broad face. He was watching the speaker closely, his great mouth shut like a trap upon the butt of his cigar. Now he leaned forward.

'Got anything to show for what you say?' he demanded.

With a bored air Mr. Ramosi turned to Simonou.

'Show them the last consignment!' he directed. Simonou stood up. There was a door behind Mr. Ramosi's chair.

'If you will come with me . . .' said Simonou. He opened the door and they filed out behind him into the corridor beyond. Mr. Ramosi remained seated at the desk, immobile as a statue, the blue smoke from his cigarette curling upwards into the mauve light.

Five minutes passed. Then there was a murmur of

excited voices in the passage. The five men trooped back into the room talking eagerly, Aronfels at their head.

'Say,' he cried, 'have you got any more li'l' ol' antikas up your sleeve like them back there?'

'The Tel el-Amarna stuff is simply marvellous,' exclaimed Seaton eagerly, at last aroused from his death-like rigidity — every man has one enthusiasm and art was his. 'What are you askin' for that head?'

'The jewels . . . !' Lucca pressed vibrating fingers to his mouth and kissed them loudly. Mr. Ismail said nothing. He was contemplating Mr. Ramosi with his black eyes staring out of his saddle-coloured face.

'It's a good consignment,' remarked Mr. Ramosi composedly. 'Please sit down, everybody!'

In a flurry of excitement they resumed their seats. Aronfels' cigar had gone out and his teeth lacerated the stump. Seaton's hands trembled as he tapped a cigarette on the shining enamel of his case.

'There's one thing . . .' he began, and stopped his tapping. But, with a backward wave of his fat hand, Aronfels silenced him.

'I think we shall be able to do business,' he said to the man at the desk. 'But first I vant to tell you something. You don't vant to be too hard on us, Mr. Ramosi, sir, and I'm going to tell you for why . . . just a few plain truths as from one gentleman to another. Things aren't all we'd like to see them in the trade and . . .'

'Mr. Aronfels' — Mr. Ramosi's clear voice checked the other's flow of speech — 'we are not going to haggle. I will state my terms and you four gentlemen are free to accept or reject them as you see fit . . .'

'Hold hard a minute! Vait till I tell you . . .' Aronfels interposed hastily.

'It would be better, Mr. Aronfels, if I were to state my conditions immediately.'

'Pardon me!' Seaton's reedy alto broke in upon the conversation. 'If I go into this business, I want to know whom I'm dealin' with,' he announced. He turned his glittering monocle upon Mr. Ramosi. 'You've been frank enough to tell us that your business is on the crook. I take it that you've contrived to put the pilferin' of the excavations on a highly organised footin'. Right! I say nothin' about that. But since you've been so candid already, suppose you go a step farther and tell us who you are!'

There was a pause. Mr. Ramosi looked across at Simonou.

'Didn't you explain to these gentlemen the conditions of this meeting?' he asked.

Simonou's saffron hue deepened and he cast a beseeching glance at Seaton.

'I expressly cautioned Mr. Seaton . . .' he began. But the Englishman cut him short.

'I don't propose to waste time beatin' about the bush,' he said, disregarding Simonou. 'Ramosi isn't your real name, we all know that. Isn't it rather childish to keep up this bluff about your identity?'

'I have told you all that it is seemly for you to know,' said Mr. Ramosi blandly, 'except my conditions, which I have not been permitted to announce. If you will take my advice, Mr. — er — Seaton, you will let it go at that. I always mean what I say. And,' he added with careful deliberation, 'I think you should realise that I am not a man to be trifled with, as others have found to their cost . . .'

'That's all very well,' rejoined Seaton argumentatively.

But Aronfels plucked him by the coat.

'Aw, shucks,' he whispered. 'Cut it out and let's get down to business.'

Seaton shrugged his shoulders and was silent. But his mouth was very stubborn and there was an unpleasant look on his young-old face.

'Now as to terms . . .' Mr. Ramosi began. His voice was smooth and even, and there was a quarter of an inch of ash on the end of the cigarette that rested steadily between his tapering fingers. He was perfectly unruffled, the coolest man in the room.

CHAPTER III

IN WHICH MR. SEATON MAKES A DISCOVERY

At Monte Carlo two evenings later, Mr. Aronfels entertained a guest at dinner. It was a mild evening and, as he strolled across the front of the Casino, the air was faintly scented with the perfume of the flowering shrubs on which the lamps in their round dull-white globes shed a milky radiance.

Freshly tubbed, freshly shaven, after an exhausting but not unprofitable afternoon in the rooms, Mr. Aronfels felt at peace with the world. He wore no overcoat and his shirt-front with its two fine pearls gleamed in the light. He carried a straw hat in his hand and, as he mopped his brow damp from the after-effects of his steaming bath and the closeness of the evening, he thought gratefully of the letter he had received that morning describing the blizzard that had descended upon New York.

The restaurant where he had reserved a table was very full. The Aquatic, the famous liner which had been taken off the Atlantic route for a Mediterranean cruise, had arrived that morning. From his bedroom Aronfels had seen her in the curious light of dawn, dimly opalescent as though the sun were shining through a screen of pale-blue glass, lying off the land, her gigantic dimensions quite dwarfing the white houses with their red roofs that covered the heights of Monaco. She had come from New York by way of Gibraltar,

Algiers, and Tunis and was sailing for Naples and Alexandria at midnight. The sunburned faces at many of the tables in the restaurant suggested that a good proportion of her passengers had availed themselves of their brief sojourn at Monte Carlo to dine on shore.

Mr. Aronfels plumped down at his table, ordered a couple of Bronxes and looked at his watch. Seaton, his guest, was late. In fact so late was he that his host was studying the bottom of his glass by the time that the Englishman appeared, without haste and immaculately arrayed in one of those double-breasted dinner-coats that King Alfonso introduced at Deauville.

'Sorry to have kept you waitin',' Seaton said, dropping into his seat, 'but I've had a busy day.'

'Any progress?' asked Aronfels, beckoning to the waiter to serve the oysters.

'Ismail has agreed to go out to Egypt.'

Aronfels looked up sharply.

'Then you've not identified Ramosi?' he queried, lowering his voice.

Seaton shook his head.

'Not yet. But I hope to have done so before Simonou sails to-night. I've had a private enquiry agent on Simonou's heels for the past forty-eight hours, ever since our meetin' at the Villa Scarabée, in fact. My man rang me up at the hotel just now to say that he thought he would be able to give me Ramosi's real name this evenin'.'

'Why, you surely have progressed!' Aronfels edged his chair nearer. 'This means that Simonou is in touch with Ramosi here, don't it?'

'I take it to be so. Mayer — that's the detective fellow — has promised to telephone me after ten

o'clock. I told him I'd be dinin' here with you. That's to say before we leave this restaurant, my friend, we shall have penetrated the secret of Mr. Ramosi's identity.'

'Then what's the sense in sending Ismail out?'

'Mayer may let us down. Besides, we have no time to risk it. Simonou sails at midnight for Alexandria in the Aquatic. To get Ismail on board I had to book his berth this afternoon, and the devil of a job I had, I can tell you, for they're packed like herrings in a barrel. If Mayer doesn't come up to scratch, Ismail will get us the information in Cairo. If he sticks to Simonou, he's bound to come across Ramosi out there sooner or later.'

Aronfels shook his head rather dubiously.

'Say, isn't Ismail taking a lot of risk? Simonou warned us against making any attempt to get at this gink's real name . . .'

Seaton pushed back his plate.

'Ismail's an Egyptian. He has a perfectly good pretext for travellin' to Egypt: he's going to visit his father in Cairo. He hasn't been home for three years.'

'Well,' remarked Aronfels, 'maybe you'll hear from Mayer in time to cancel Ismail's sailing . . .'

'I shan't do that in any event,' Seaton declared firmly. 'I intend to have a man on the spot to keep me posted on what Simonou and his little pal are up to.'

'Hell!' exclaimed Aronfels. 'Ain't the business all right? If it's good enough for Bender Aronfels, sonny, it ought to be good enough for you. And your partners aren't kicking any, you said?'

'They're satisfied all right,' Seaton agreed. 'But I'm not!'

'Say, boy, what's eating you?'

Very deliberately Seaton adjusted his monocle and scrutinised his host.

'I object to the lack of confidence that Ramosi's reticence implies,' he announced calmly. 'When I taxed him, before you all, with hidin' behind a pseudonym, he didn't deny it, but, with his damned supercilious air, he had the nerve to threaten me. I'm not standin' for it, Aronfels. And you can take it from me that when *I* do business with a man, whatever you or Lucca or my partners in London may think, I want to know who he is.'

'So do I, boy, so do I. But at times open diplomacy don't go. When you've been in the business as many years as I have, you'll find what uncommon modesty some folk display in their transactions with the dealers. I recollect, when I was a youngster . . . for land's sake!' He broke off, staring. 'If it isn't Mrs. Averil!'

He half rose from the table and bowed effusively to a graceful, girlish figure in a black velvet evening coat with an ermine roll collar who, in company with an older woman, was just sitting down across the room.

Seaton put up his glass and critically examined the newcomer.

'Charming!' he drawled. 'That's Lady Rachel Hannington, the large lady she's with. You'll have to introduce me to your friend, Aronfels? Who is she, anyway?'

'Widow of Mark Averil, of New York. He was an old client of mine. He got killed in an automobile wreck about a year ago.'

'Not much of the widow about her,' commented the Englishman. 'Why she's wearin' a gold dress!'

'Well,' observed his companion, 'come to think of it,

I don't know as how she'd much call to put on the weeds for Mark. He and a woman he had on the side were killed together!'

'The devil they were!'

'Gosh,' observed the elder man reflectively, 'some fellers certainly do hand their women-folk the raw deal. I don't reckon to be anything better than what I seem to be, but gee! I hope I'd never wish on Mrs. Aronfels what Averil put over on that sweet girl across the room. Married for three years they were, and times when I'd go over to their place on Long Island to value the pictures or look at a piece that Averil had bought, she'd tell me about her husband, not to boast, I don't mean, but the way a happily married woman will talk . . . "Mr. Averil" this and "Mr. Averil" that. And she was the prettiest, sweetest creature that ever you saw, not but what she isn't to-day, only, she's changed . . . sort of harder, I mean to say, and my! don't she hate the men!

'The last time I saw her — she'd dropped in at my place on Fifth Avenue about Averil's collection of pictures: she sold up everything on his death — I felt I ought to say something — you know, sympathy and that — about her husband. I hadn't heard about the other woman then, for they managed to keep the right story out of the papers.

'"Mr. Aronfels," she said, "I've known you for a long time" — that was right; for her father used to do business with me, too, when he was alive — "and you may as well be told the truth. My husband was killed with his mistress with whom he'd been living almost ever since we were married," she said. "So you see there's no need to offer me sympathy," she said.

'Gee! it was fierce. You could have knocked me down with a feather. I couldn't have believed it possible, I told her; for I felt I had to say something. "With men anything is possible, Mr. Aronfels," she told me. It don't sound much, I know, but, say, if you'd heard her voice, ice, and then frozen over . . .'

Meanwhile at her table the woman they were discussing was satisfying her companion's curiosity as to the identity of the portly gentleman who had bowed so devotedly.

'That's old Aronfels, the New York dealer, Rachel,' she said. 'He disposed of the pictures when . . . when Mark died.'

'My dear child,' replied her friend, 'it was only the other day, when I met Commie Winter at Cannes, that I heard the truth about you and Mark Averil. I didn't even know that your husband was dead. Why ever didn't you write and tell me?'

Jean Averil had slipped off her wrap. She shrugged her gleaming bare shoulders, her grey eyes studying her nails.

'It's no good worrying other people with one's troubles,' she answered. 'What's past is past and one can only hope to forget!'

There was no emotion in her voice and she met Lady Rachel's compassionate gaze without a tremor.

'*Petite marmite*, a fried sole, and *poularde poêlée* with a salad will do very nicely, Louis,' Lady Rachel announced over one massive shoulder to the very *empressé maître d'hôtel*, 'and some toast Melba. And tell the *sommeiller* a bottle of the Lanson brut, *sans année* — no, no, my dear,' she insisted firmly in reply to Jean Averil's protests, 'you're going on the sea and a drop of fizz will do you good.'

A blue-chinned waiter, with the coiffure of a bull-fighter minus the pig-tail, fussed up with a rack of toast.

'Forget?' remarked Lady Rachel. 'Forget, yes, my dear, but also remember Once bit, twice shy!'

And as though to mark her point her large white teeth crunched crisply into a square of thin, hard toast.

'You're still quite young, aren't you? What? Twenty-five, twenty-six?'

'Twenty-five!' said Jean.

'An infant! You're beautiful, my dear, your taste in clothes is perfect, and you must have been left very well off. A year or two will go by and one fine day they'll be at you to marry again!'

'My God!' murmured the girl at her side.

'Oh, you feel like that to-day, I dare say,' Lady Rachel rejoined calmly. 'But, mark my words, Jean, unless you're strong-minded about it, one of these devils will get round you. I know them! I'm not a man-hater, my dear. I find men irresistibly attractive with their self-possession, their ruthlessness, their *esprit de corps*. Life would be horribly insipid without them. But when *my* beauty ran off with my best friend: — she was a handsome baggage, but not half the woman that I am!' — Lady Rachel ran a not unappreciative eye over her magnificent neck and arms that the low black corsage abundantly displayed — I said to myself, "Rachel, my dear, never again!"

'I meant it and I've stuck to it. I've loads of men friends and it amuses me to sit under the palms at my villa at Cannes and watch them swarming round me, fancying themselves in love with me or my money, as the case may be. There may be some good men,' she admitted generously, 'but a man is good only as long as

you don't surrender to him. And remember this, Jeanie, my girl, the best man that was ever born is fit only for the guillotine!'

So determined was she, so transparently serious, that her guest could not keep from smiling. She had a nice smile, a sort of inward illuminant that filled her rather grave face with charm.

'Dear old Rachel,' she said, 'you know it all, don't you? But how brave you are! I haven't forgotten what a bad time you had when Richard went off like that!'

Thoughtful for an instant, the other crumbled her toast. Then she raised her glass.

'One lives and learns, Jeanie,' she remarked in her old bantering way. 'Here's hoping that you'll remember my sermon!'

'And so,' she resumed presently, 'you're off to Egypt?'

'Yes,' said Jean, 'I couldn't bear to stay in America, so I thought I'd come abroad for a year or two. First I went to Paris: — I had some idea of renting a studio and going in for art; but I was restless and the weather was so wretched. I'd always wanted to go to Egypt, and so, all of a sudden, I made up my mind to come to Monte and catch the Aquatic. I don't know what sort of a cabin they'll give me: they promised me an outside one. The ship's awfully full, they warned me at the agents' in Paris. But I don't care much as long as I get to the sun!'

'The Egyptian sunshine is wonderful,' Lady Rachel agreed. 'It'll be a great change for you, Jeanie. But don't get brooding. The evenings are rather sad when the sun is sinking and from the Nile you hear the

sailors singing at their work. However,' she went on in her old vein, 'my principal recollection of Egypt, besides Richard's continual complaints about being robbed, is riding donkeys that made me so sore that I couldn't sit down for a week! Hullo, your art-dealer person is off; no, it's his friend. By the way, it's just occurred to me that I know a man who's also catching the Aquatic here . . . '

'Not a Greek called Simonou, is it? I met him at the Ritz in Paris and ran into him in the street this morning. He's leaving to-night . . .'

'No, it's an Egyptian, Prince Said Hussein, a most amusing creature. He was at the Sporting Club last night. I don't think it would be *convenable* for me to give you a letter to him; but I'll wireless him in the morning to look you up on board.'

'But, Rachel, an Egyptian!'

'He's as white as you or I. He had an Albanian or a Circassian mother, I can't remember which; anyhow, something excessively alluring and romantic in the feminine line. He's fabulously rich and gives the most lavish entertainments in Cairo. Richard and I saw a lot of him there. You'll enjoy meeting him tremendously. Good gracious, what's that'?

She started violently as did most of the other diners. A loud report had sounded outside. Abruptly the hum of conversation ceased. The band was not playing at the moment and there was an instant's almost complete silence. Heads were craned round towards the door.

'It is nozzing, miladi . . .' — the waiter with the toreador side-whiskers stooped to Lady Rachel's ear: — 'a *pneu*, a tyre of automobile, he make *paff!* Everything all raight!'

'Carry on, girls and boys,' cried a fruity voice at the next table, 'only a tyre busted.'

Conversation was resumed and the next moment the band started to play. Lady Rachel and her guest went on with their dinner. They did not observe the *maître d'hôtel* as he sidled unobtrusively to the table where Mr. Aronfels awaited his friend's return from the telephone whither he had been summoned to speak with Monsieur Mayer. They did not notice Mr. Aronfels' precipitate departure. Neither they nor any of the other diners at the restaurant knew that, as music and laughter once more rang through the restaurant, the dead body of a well-dressed man, wearing one of the double-breasted dinner-coats that King Alfonso introduced at Deauville, was being expeditiously moved from the telephone box.

It is not meet that merrymakers should know these things.

The team-work at Monte Carlo is very good.

CHAPTER IV

THE MAN IN D7

The SS. Aquatic was ready for sea.

Too huge to enter the little white harbour, whose twin moles, like curving arms, seemed to beckon her to their embrace, she lay off the rock of Monaco, her towering bulk too solid to betray the gentle swell of the Mediterranean heaving phosphorescently in the moonlight that silvered the swathes of smoke pouring incessantly from her funnels. In long lines, one above the other, her portholes glowed yellow, 'like the eyes of a many-headed monster,' Jean Averil told herself as she approached in the prancing little tender. It was, indeed, as though the brave ship which usually in January shivered to the savage slapping of the North Atlantic rollers, were opening her myriad eyes in amazement at finding herself placidly contemplating the jewelled heights of Monaco under a lucent moon.

On the bridge the officer of the watch, the collar of his greatcoat turned up against the nipping night air, gazed out across the glistening black water to the land where, backed against the star-streaming sky, the Casino hung poised in radiant outline. It was close on midnight. On shore at the Café de Paris the band was playing 'La Violetera.' Above the noises of the preparations for departure, the raucous shouts, the scrape of feet, the thudding of trunks, the haunting rhythm of the melody hammered itself over the still air to the lofty height of the bridge . . .

'Señors, pour vos Señoritas
Des mains de la Carmencita
Acceptez ces violettes
C'est du bonheur qu'on achète
Le Bon Dieu le vous rendra!'

In the wireless cabin of the bridge the foot of the operator tapped out the steady beat of the refrain.

Into the broad beam of an arc-light affixed above the gangway that thrust itself into the void from one of the lower decks, the tender came flurrying. 'Stand by!' roared a purple-faced officer, muffled up to the neck, who stood at the rail. Feet scampered over the deck. 'She's the last tender, thanks be,' he muttered through his teeth to the passenger at his side, a tall figure in a heavy travelling coat. 'We'll be off as soon as this lot's aboard, Mr. Cradock!'

'Ship's pretty full, I take it?' asked the other.

'We always are on these Mediterranean cruises,' the officer rejoined. 'There was scarcely a vacant berth when we left N'York. You're in luck to have an outside cabin, getting on at Monte, Mr. Cradock. Keep her nose for'ard, Cap'n!' he bawled with sudden ferocity into the night. 'Keep her nose for'ard, can't you? You'll have your ladder down else!'

Dancing and mincing in the rolling swell the little tender was nosing her way alongside. Standing in the centre of the dirty deck was a huddle of passengers, most of the men in white mufflers and overcoats over their evening dress, puffing fragrant cigars, well-dined, well-wined, hilarious, rather noisy, the women generally in evening cloaks, their dainty gold or silver shoes oddly out of keeping with the wet and grimy gratings underfoot. From on high, as their abject little craft bobbed

in the trough of the sea, the officer, a gesticulating figure with head haloed by the arc-light's luminous disc, was shouting down instructions at their skipper. 'There's a coil of rope on that hatch yet an' ye haven't the sense to use it. Keep her up, Cap'n, damn it, keep her up!'

It was the ocean greyhound patronising the mongrel pup, and the pup resented it. The captain of the tender, a bottle-nosed Provençal mariner, was going about things in his own sweet way. As it was a French way, it differed from the British manner of execution, though in the ultimate achievement the two methods agreed. With a vast amount of hoarse shouting and a prodigious number of bumps, with ropes that came whizzing down unexpectedly out of the night, the tender was at length made fast in a seamanlike fashion at the foot of the gangway and the passengers came on board.

The wind had freshened and the swell increased. The gangway was heaving up and down as the passengers mounted it to the deck. Cradock, standing at the rail, caught snatches of their talk as they staggered and slithered up the footway: 'I passed the bank, damn it, and it went ten times . . .'; 'I always follow colour, m'dear . . .'; 'Old Teddy cleaned up a packet . . .' With an ear-splitting wail a siren screeched thrice from the bridge. 'Come along, please!' adjured a patient steward posted at the head of the gangway to hand the passengers to the deck.

It had rained in the early evening and the gangplank was greasy. The last of the belated passengers was ascending from the tender. It was a girl, a slender figure in a velvet evening coat with ermine collar and narrow thin sandal-shoes of gold tissue. As she reached the top

her foot slipped at the very moment that the gangway made a mighty heave and she would have been pitched on her face, for the steward had turned aside to help a woman with her baggage, had not Cradock stepped forward and caught her.

She landed forcibly in his arms, her face against the peaty tweed of his overcoat. Very gently he set her upon her feet. Under the powerful arc-lamp it was as bright as day and man and woman saw each other clearly. The girl found herself looking up into a warm brown face and a pair of stern blue eyes with those puckers at the corners that come from staring into the tropical glare. It was a gaunt rather moody face with a long straight nose, like a Roman centurion's, and a firm, somewhat bitter mouth. He was a big man, all muscles, with broad shoulders and the narrow hips of the athlete. The touch of his fingers on her arm felt like steel clamps.

It was only for an instant that she regarded him; for in a moment, without uttering a word, he had turned his back on her and strode away down the open companionway that led to the interior of the ship. She said nothing either, but remained standing where he had put her down, absently fingering the string of pearls clasped about her neck.

An excited voice broke in upon her reverie.

'That was a narrow squeak, Mrs. Averil. I hope you didn't hurt yourself?'

She turned to find an olive-skinned, sleek face smiling solicitously into hers.

'It's quite all right, thank you, Mr. Simonou,' she told him. 'It's these ridiculous shoes of mine. I slipped.'

'If it hadn't been for that fellow who caught you,'

Simonou observed, 'you'd have had a nasty fall against that stanchion. Hullo,' he went on, looking round, 'he's taken himself off. I was farther along the deck. I saw what happened, but couldn't get near enough to do anything. Do let me take you along and find your cabin!'

'I wonder if you could get hold of my maid,' said Jean Averil. 'Simmons is her name. A thin person. You couldn't mistake her for anything but English. She came on board with my trunks this afternoon.'

At that instant a solemn voice spoke in her ear: 'Here I am, Madam!'

Simmons wore her most forbidding expression. Mouse-coloured hair tightly scraped back off the forehead, hollow eyes, prominent cheek-bones, and tight, thin lips are not the attributes of beauty; and when Simmons was affronted, her features could be compared only to the hangman's yellow face of doom.

'Ah, there you are, Simmons!' cried Jean. 'Have you found my cabin?'

'This way, Madam,' the maid replied in sepulchral tones and moved towards the companion. 'Cabin you could scarcely call it. It's in the basement of the ship and there's not even a window, unless you'd call a hole looking into the corridor a window. More like a brush-cupboard than a place where *I'd* put a lady to sleep!'

But Jean was by now habituated to her hand-maiden's dourness. She had engaged her in New York when she wanted a maid to accompany her to Europe. Simmons, who had spent eighteen months in the country, while 'holding with' Prohibition, did not 'hold with' some of its accompanying manifestations. She had therefore agreed without difficulty to shake the

dust of America from her formidable feet. As Jean had told Simonou, she was patently English, as British as the Lord Mayor's coachman or the Bank of England, stolid as the one, reliable as the other. Her outlook was invariably tinged with melancholy and Jean followed her in search of her cabin without attaching undue weight to her Abigail's forebodings.

But that Simmons' habitual pessimism was justified on this occasion was her thought as, with a sinking heart, she surveyed the narrow airless little cabin. 'In the basement' it certainly was, that is to say, almost on the water-line, on D, the lowest passenger deck. Already the ship was trembling to the swell and, excellent sailor though she was, Jean had a sudden depressing picture of herself cooped up in that tiny place during a rough night at sea.

She glanced back at the door. 'But this is D5!' she exclaimed. 'D7 is an outside cabin. They promised me D7. Is there anybody in D7, Simmons?'

'A man!' replied the maid — as one might say, 'A viper!' Simmons did not 'hold with' men, as to their cost adventurous Casanovas in the steward's rooms of sundry great hotels had discovered, who, lured by stories of her savings, had sought to penetrate her maidenly reserve. Her virtue was adamantine and impregnable and she went clothed in it like a pachyderm in its hide. She replied: 'A man!' and sniffed.

'Oh, but this is intolerable!' Jean declared. 'I'll see the purser instantly. You wait there, Simmons!'

But the purser, polite and charming, though, with midnight past, he still could not call it a day, gave little satisfaction.

'Paris had no business to promise you D7, Mrs.

Averil,' he said, scanning his list with furrowed brow. 'And I don't know where to move you. Every berth is taken. We had fourteen come on at Monte Carlo. It's been a proper business to make room for them all, I tell you!'

'But I was *promised* D7,' Jean, who had a strong strain of doggedness in her, repeated. 'When did this other person reserve it?'

'He came on at Monte Carlo, too, Mrs. Averil. But he was on board before you. So you see . . .'

'But I *don't* see,' she objected. 'The cabin was promised to me and you must give it to me. This man will have to change, that's all!'

'If you could put up with D5 for a day or two, Mrs. Averil,' the purser suggested suavely — he was a married man and had a healthy terror of a desperate and determined woman — 'perhaps at Naples . . .'

But Jean, with a long line of stubborn New England ancestors protesting against what seemed to be a conspiracy to deprive her of her rights, swept aside any idea of compromise.

'You'll just have to see this man,' she announced very decidedly, gathering her ermine-lined wrap about her against the draught that blew across the landing, 'and explain to him that a mistake has been made. And if he's a gentleman, I'm sure he'll change immediately. Who is he, anyway?'

The purser consulted his list.

'A Mr. Cradock, Mr. David Cradock!'

'Well, please do as I say!'

Wearily the harassed official leaned out over the counter of his office. 'Pardon me!' he said, and raising the flap, crossed the hall to a tall man who stood with his

back to them, studying the notices. They exchanged a few words, then the man strode away and the purser returned to Jean.

'It's no good,' he said. 'He won't change. We'll be at Naples the day after to-morrow, Mrs. Averil, and if . . .'

'Is *that* Mr. Cradock?' demanded the girl, pointing at the tall form that was now descending the companion. On the purser's affirmative, the picture of vibrating indignation, she hurried after the retreating figure.

But it was evident that her ungallant fellow traveller knew his way about the ship and that she did not. She soon lost sight of him in the maze of lower decks. She asked the way of a steward who was coming out of the cook's galley and dejectedly returned to her cabin.

It stood in a little white *cul-de-sac*, off which two cabins opened, D5 on the one side, D7 on the other, a little farther along. The door of D7 was closed, but, as she halted, irresolute, outside, she heard someone moving about within. With a sudden air of determination she tapped briskly on the door. 'Come in!' a deep voice cried.

A man stood at the bed unpacking a suitcase. His back was turned to her. Jean liked the cabin as soon as she saw it. It was considerably larger than hers and quite cool, almost too cool, for the porthole stood wide open, disclosing a little nocturne of the lights of Monte Carlo against a blue-black background.

'Oh, Curtis,' said the man, without turning round, 'who's this female who's trying to sneak my . . .'

At that moment he glanced behind him and the words died in his throat. Jean recognised the tall stranger who had caught her when she had stumbled at the gang-

way. If the recognition were mutual, the man gave no sign.

'I beg your pardon,' he said stiffly, 'I thought you were the steward. Did you want anything?'

He had taken off his overcoat and was wearing a shabby old suit of Harris tweed, baggy at the knees. His heavy brown shoes were rusty and ill-cleaned. But he looked and spoke like a gentleman for all that.

Jean Averil felt her temper rising. It was perfectly obvious, she told herself, that he knew who she was and his cool determination to ignore his *faux pas* annoyed her. A spot of colour appeared in her pink-and-white cheeks.

'I came to tell you,' she said distantly, 'that there has been a mistake about the cabins. This is mine. Yours is opposite, D5!'

'I don't think so,' he replied in perfectly even tones. 'This is my cabin all right. I advise you to see the purser about it in the morning.'

So saying he laid a hand tentatively on his suitcase as a mute hint to her that he wished to go on with his unpacking.

'But you don't seem to understand,' Jean said with some heat. 'This is *my* cabin. *My cabin!* It was promised to me. You must give it up.'

The man shrugged his shoulders. 'A suggestion of the kind was made to me by the purser,' he answered. 'I told him it was not convenient to change. I'm sorry!' And he lifted out a suit of pyjamas and laid it on the bed.

A narrow gold shoe tapped out an impatient warning on the carpet.

'Do you seriously propose that I should sleep in a cabin without an outside porthole?' she demanded icily.

Try as she might, she could not keep her voice from shaking a little. She felt outraged, almost at the point of tears.

'I didn't design this ship, you know,' the man replied quietly and placed a razor-case on the washstand.

'It isn't fair,' Jean burst out. 'I've never slept in a room with the window shut in my life. You take my cabin when I'm not there and . . . and . . .'

The man at the bed heard a little sniff. For the first time since he had swung round at her entrance, he looked at her. He saw her with her straight brown hair rather blown about by the breezes of the ship, her face flushed scarlet, her eyes flaming with indignation and suspiciously bright.

' . . . and when I ask you to give it up to me, you . . . you refuse!'

He leant forward and touched the bell in the wall.

'I didn't realise there was any question of a request!' he observed. The steward's face appeared round the door. 'Curtis,' said the man at the bed, 'there's been a mix-up about the cabins. This lady's coming in here and I'm taking D5. Please get my things moved across at once!'

Jean Averil said nothing. The steward, whose face imperfectly concealed his feelings on the subject of post midnight chores, silently began to gather things together while the dispossessed tenant of D7 made Jean a little bow and stalked out of the cabin.

She remained staring blankly at two blue garments lying on the bunk. Oddly, it came back to her that she had not seen a suit of man's pyjamas thus laid out on a bed since the night before Mark Averil had left her, fourteen months before, to go on that pretended busi-

ness trip to Chicago that had ended in a ravine in the Adirondacks. She gave a little shudder and looked about her. On the washstand the razor-case was dancing a little jig. Everything in the cabin was shivering and straining and the open porthole now circled a patch of inky blackness.

The S.S. Aquatic was at sea.

CHAPTER V

SAID HUSSEIN

The telephone call from the Lake Placid newspaper that, one autumn night, had roused Jean Averil from sleep to tell her that her husband was dead, was destined to bring her whole world crashing in ruins about her ears. Hers was a clean, unsullied mind; and the sordid intrigue which that message was fated to lay bare filled her with stark horror.

Not that she had been the blindly adoring wife; not that her marriage had ever been a passionate love idyll. It was the clean streak in him that had first drawn her to Mark Averil, dashing polo player, reckless rider to hounds, and crack shot. Love of the open air had been the bond between them, a bond of warm affection, of good comradeship, doomed to be so tragically, so irretrievably severed.

She was only twenty when she first met Mark in London during the season. He had come to England for the polo. At the outbreak of the war he had 'wangled' a commission with the British cavalry and, full of honours, had transferred to the New York Division when America had come into the fray. Jean found him a beloved member of that little band of Anglo-Saxon brothers, whose national rivalry is sent off the field with the ponies at the end of the game and whose friendship as serenely survives the pin-pricks of a soulless Foreign Office as the windy bombast of Western Senators.

Mark's dash, his fine horsemanship, carried her off her feet. She was one of the successes of the London season and the ingredients for the distillation of another American peeress were all ready. But Averil was of her own race, a blond, clear-skinned Apollo, with splendid torso modelled in the silken polo vest, narrow-waisted, and long of line from thigh to spur as he smiled down at her from the saddle.

She had no *jeune fille* illusions about Mark when she married him. He was ten years older than she and she knew he had lived his life, as the saying is, like the other young men of his set. But, as there was no treachery in her, she could not anticipate that the moment would ever come when old ties, laid aside on marriage but not broken, would reassert themselves and prevail over weakness bred, not of vice, but of the monotony of a life of wealthy indolence.

There had been no children. She had thanked God for that, almost her first thought on realising what the finding of the dead body of a woman under the débris of Mark's car signified. She could at least slam and bolt the door on the past and begin life over again. But a life without men, she promised herself; at least, without marriage or entanglements.

It was not true, as Aronfels had alleged, that she hated men. But the lesson of her experience seemed to be that to hold a man in marriage a woman must constantly be on the watch. That was not her idea of love, of life. If a man's loyalty were to be secured only at that price, then no! She had a sudden vision of herself as one of those terrible-looking viragos one sees in the comic strips in the newspapers hunting through their husbands' pockets . . .

Jean Averil gazed out across the foam-crested slate-blue winter sea. To stern the rocky fastnesses of the Isle of Monte Cristo merged their rugged summits in a swathe of snow-white cloud. On the beam the long beige mass of Corsica lay in the distance under a pale sun-ray. It was their first day out. In proud disdain of the broken seas, the Aquatic was ploughing her course serenely for Naples. There had been some movement during the night; but now the great ship was forging ahead with little more than a tremor.

On the promenade deck the stewards were serving the midday broth along the lines of steamer-chairs. The Pyramids had already cast their long shadows across men's minds on board the Aquatic. The ship's library had been ransacked for books on Egypt and most passengers seemed to be reading Breasted or Baedeker.

As she walked briskly along the deck, Jean glanced casually at the array of animated, absorbed, or indifferent faces. Apart from Mr. Simonou, the Greek, she did not know a soul on board. At dinner that night they would get the new passenger-list and she would see who had joined the ship at Monte Carlo. For the moment she was glad of her solitude.

She had not met her neighbour of D deck again. She had breakfasted in the restaurant; but Cradock had not appeared. She had spent rather a worried quarter of an hour over her early morning tea in bed reviewing the incident of the previous evening. Her cheeks burned when she thought of the stinging rebuff this odious person had administered. He had treated her like a child. If she would say 'please,' she might be humoured. And 'this female' he had called her! 'I wish now,' she told herself, 'I'd let him keep his old cabin!'

At the back of her mind, however, she had a little pricking of remorse. Perhaps she had been rather arrogant: Mark had always given her her own way and she was not used to being thwarted. After all, this grumpy fellow had been rather clever in springing forward exactly at the right moment to save her from a bad fall and, now she came to think of it, she had not even thanked him.

She had let him go without a word! How ill-bred he must have thought her! She had reached the end of the deck in her walk and, halted in the shelter of the glass screen, idly watched a canvas curtain flapping in the wind round the turn of the promenade. Why had she said nothing? Somehow the sombre regard of those stern blue eyes of his had abashed her; it was stupid, of course, a man she had never seen before, but the memory of that instant in which he had held her in his steely grip left her a little breathless. She shook herself impatiently as though to shed the recollection and, turning the angle of the deck, walked straight into the man she was thinking of.

He was standing at the rail looking down upon the wide expanse of deck that was normally given over to the steerage, but, in the absence of third-class passengers on the Mediterranean cruise, was now deserted. One lean hand rested on the flat teak bar, one foot was poised on a lower rung of the rail. He was staring into space, a lonely, rather pathetic figure.

He stepped hastily back against the deck-house to let her pass. But Jean stopped.

'I'm afraid I never thanked you for saving me from a nasty fall when I came on board last night,' she said. 'I looked for you to do so, but you had disappeared.'

He averted his eyes. He did not speak. Nothing daunted, Jean persisted, a little humorous note in her voice.

'I hope you didn't find D5 *too* uncomfortable last night?'

Still the man did not look at her or speak. Instead, he turned his back on her and walked away.

'Well!' gasped Jean, indignant. She heard a smothered laugh behind her. Simonou had come up, very smart in a soft cap, fleecy overcoat, and white-and-tan deck shoes.

'Cradock's manners are past praying for, Mrs. Averil,' he remarked genially. 'Don't you try and take him in hand! you'll only waste your time!'

'You needn't worry!' she retorted with spirit. 'Say, it's lucky I know *some* Englishmen who aren't bores or I might judge the whole race by him. Who *is* this Cradock man?'

'He's a digger!'

'A digger? Do you mean he's a miner?'

Simonou giggled. 'Good Lord, no! He's an excavator. He's been at it for years. He works for old Peter Lomax, you know, Professor Lomax, the Egyptologist.'

'Really? It sounds rather interesting!'

The Greek shrugged his shoulders.

'Between ourselves,' he said, lowering his voice, 'I should steer clear of Cradock. He hasn't got a very good reputation.'

'How do you mean?'

'Well, it's an old story now. He was kicked out of the British Diplomatic Service over some scandal when he was on Kitchener's staff at the Residency. The fellows in Egypt give him rather a wide berth and he lives like

a hermit out there on the *Gebel*, the mountains you know, beyond Luxor.'

'What did he do, do you know?'

'I've forgotten the details. There was a woman mixed up in the case. I know it was a dirty business. I'm only telling you this to warn you, you know . . .'

Jean Averil's face hardened. 'Good gracious,' she retorted, 'you needn't warn *me*. I've got much too strong a prejudice in favour of good manners to cultivate the acquaintance of Mr. Cradock, I assure you . . .'

A bugle brayed merrily in the entrails of the ship.

'Luncheon!' she cried. 'And I'm starving. Shall we go down?'

'A grey sea, she is not good,' Jean's table companion at lunch warned her, a dapper little brown man who introduced himself as Mr. Ismail. 'I was born in Alexandria and I know the sea. We run into bad weather, Madame, *vous allez voir!*'

A pleasant, well-mannered little person, Mr. Ismail, an art dealer in Paris, he told Jean. She was interested to discover that he knew Mr. Aronfels, had seen him quite recently on the Riviera. Mr. Ismail was going to Cairo to visit his father.

'If I meet you in Cairo, Madame,' he said, 'you come with me to our great Museum. I show you things like no collection in the whole world contains, jewels like what the ladies love. The statues, the mummies — these are for the professors. But I will take you to see the golden crown of Queen Tewosret with the fifteen blossoms and the ruby bracelet of the Treasure of Tûkh el-Karamûs. I will make myself your guide. You come with me, *hein?*'

Luncheon over, Jean went to her cabin and rested until tea-time. She was seated before her mirror powdering her nose preparatory to mounting to the lounge when Simmons appeared.

'There's a black outside asking for you, Madam,' she boomed.

'A black, Simmons? What on earth do you mean?'

'A native, Madam!'

'What does he want?'

'Not being acquainted with his heathen lingo, Madam, I'm shore I can't say. He has a letter. I went to take it from him, but no, his lordship won't part with it.'

'Well, Simmons,' said Jean, smiling and casting a precautionary glance in the glass, 'I'd better see him, I suppose.'

In the alleyway outside the cabin an immense coal-black man, gorgeously arrayed in scarlet, waited submissively. On seeing Jean, he made a rapid gesture, laying the palm of his hand in quick succession upon forehead, lips, and heart, at the same time bowing low. He held out a letter. It was addressed to 'Mrs. Averil.' Rather overwhelmed by this startling apparition and the exotic magnificence of his red tarbush, scarlet monkey-jacket, gold sash, and baggy zouave trousers, Jean opened the letter and read:

Dear Mrs. Averil,

I have had a wireless from my friend, Lady Rachel Hannington, telling me that I may present my respects to you. It would give me great pleasure if you would dine with me and a few friends this evening. I shall be waiting for you in the smoke-room at half-past eight. I hope you will be able to come.

The note was signed '*Said Hussein*' and there was a postcript which said: '*Please give Makhmoud your reply.*'

'Good Heavens!' thought Jean. 'Rachel's Egyptian prince!'

Woman-like her mind went instantly to the vital question of dress. The golden gown that she had worn at Monte Carlo, she decided, would do. At the *couturier's* in Paris they had called it a 'robe Tut-ankh-Amen.' It seemed eminently suitable.

She turned to the messenger. 'Will you tell the Prince . . .' she began. But the Arab only flashed his teeth at her, and spreading out his hands, made a clicking noise with his tongue and balanced his head to and fro. She realised that he wished to tell her he did not understand English. So she tore off the back of the letter, wrote on it, '*I shall be delighted to come. Jean Averil*' — and gave the slip to the native. She felt a little thrill of romance as, with great dignity, the tall black salaamed again and stalked away. What would the Prince be like, she wondered? And, oh dear, how did one address him?

When she entered the smoke-room that evening, not more than a quarter of an hour after the appointed time, looking very girlish in her simple, clinging gown of gold tissue, her questing eye picked out no one whose appearance even remotely coincided with her idea of the outward semblance of an Oriental prince. A vigorous-looking man, exceedingly well-groomed, with tawny hair seemed to be watching the door. But it was not until he came up and spoke to her that she realised that he was her host.

'It was so nice of you to come: it is Mrs. Averil, isn't it?' was his greeting. 'Let me give you a cocktail. And you must meet my guests.'

His English was absolutely flawless and his voice had a restful quality that was most attractive. In his well-tailored dinner-coat and white waistcoat with its four very small solitaire diamond buttons, he looked like a fashionable Londoner. There was a little touch of extreme deference in his address to Jean that suggested the Continent; but there was nothing of the East about him unless it were the magnificent emerald *cabochon* ring which he wore on the little finger of his right hand. The splendid stone rather unpleasantly drew attention to the fact that the first joint of the finger which it adorned was missing.

A number of people were gathered about a table where, in their frosted glasses, the cocktails were slithering and jigging about. At the bar the bottles were dancing in their racks to the clinking accompaniment of a pile of spoons on a tray. All the leather- and wood-work of the smoke-room was groaning and creaking and through the open door Jean could hear the hiss of the waves as they beat against the sides of the ship. Every now and then the Aquatic, without actually pitching, seemed to shake herself free from the eager embrace of the ocean. Jean thought of little Ismail's warning.

The Prince presented her to a string of people, the Henry Richboroughs, a New York banker and his wife, the last-named a matronly person with short hair of that extraordinary shade which its votaries suppose to be auburn, an Italian marchese in a violently-waisted dinner-coat with a white camellia in his button-hole, an elderly Englishman, and an ox-eyed Swedish countess in black velvet. At dinner, which was served at a special table, Jean found herself on the right hand of their host, Mr. Richborough on her other side. On the tables of the

restaurant the fiddles were ominously displayed; but at Prince Said Hussein's they were almost hidden under masses of flowers. A spray of purple orchids was laid beside each woman's plate.

'And so this is your first visit to Egypt?' said the Prince to Jean. 'I have a house in Cairo. I trust I shall see something of you. Where are you going to stay?'

At Shepheard's, she told him. She wanted to be central as she intended to spend only a few days in Cairo before going up to Luxor. 'They tell me that Cairo is apt to be cold in January,' she said, 'and I do so long for the warmth of the sun.'

The Prince nodded. 'Only those who have seen the sunset at Luxor, or, better still, the dawn, can understand why inevitably the ancient Egyptians worshipped Amon-Ra, the sun god. At Luxor you have the Nile and the hills; but without the sun they are nothing. It is the sun which clothes them with their beauty; 'Amon-Ra that giveth life,' as the inscriptions in the tombs say.'

He spoke vigorously, arrestingly, with a glitter in his eye. His eyes were the strangest part of him, Jean told herself, reddish in hue, the lashes golden, the heavy eyebrows tawny against the smooth white brow. The irises seemed to catch the light like the sheen on the stone they call cat's eye and, with the play of light and shade, to vary in colour from topaz-yellow to madder-brown.

'Are you interested in Egyptology?' he asked her.

'I've got a lot of books,' she rejoined. 'I'm going to read it up . . .'

'Fatal, absolutely fatal!' he announced in mock despair. 'With your head a jumble of facts you'll hire a dragoman at Luxor and you'll rush round from tomb to temple and from temple to tomb and your guide will

confuse your mind still further with his bad English and, worse, with his inaccurate scraps of knowledge. No human being can, in the span of a man's life, obtain a really comprehensive grasp of the whole historical and religious significance of the Egypt of the Pharaohs. So why do the winter tourists try? Ignore the facts, ignore the history, my dear Mrs. Averil, and seek only for the beauty in the life of this strange people whose whole existence centred in the sun . . .'

He looked at her with an air of challenge. His bold, beak-like nose above the bristling toothbrush moustache, the resolute mouth and the clefted, jutting chin were combative. His glance ran over her. When one looked into his eyes, they were seen to give the features a curious furtive air and their changing hue kept the general expression of the face constantly in flux. It struck her that it would not be easy to divine the thoughts of this man.

'I'm afraid I'm not very learned,' she answered, smiling. 'And I'm terribly lazy. I'm quite sure I'd rather sit and dream in the sunshine than climb down a lot of musty old tombs.'

'You can appreciate beauty, I know,' the Prince observed. 'This charming frock of yours . . . but it is Egyptian! This close-clinging fabric, this sash bound about the hips, it is the national dress of the women of old Egypt. Even thus is Ankh-es-en-pa-Aten, Tut-ankh-Amen's young queen, depicted on the panels of the King's chair of state. Just such dresses, in colours as brilliant as your cloth of gold, though the artists have been dust these three thousand years, you will see incised on the walls of the tombs in the Valley of the Kings. You are a lover of beauty, Mrs. Averil. If you have

eyes to see, you will find it in the ruins of Egypt's ancient civilisation.'

'You remind me of what an Egyptian I met at lunch was telling me,' she remarked. 'A man called Ismail, he's a dealer in Paris. Perhaps you know him?'

The lynx eyes flamed oddly. The Prince's long fingers, with their sparse thatch of light down, stole up and smoothed down the reddish bristles of his close-cropped head, yellowing at the temples where the years had set their mark.

'It's a very common name in Egypt,' he replied.

Jean told her host of Mr. Ismail's enthusiasm for the jewellery of the Cairo Museum.

'He is right,' the Prince pronounced. 'It's a unique collection. But a museum is a charnel-house of beauty. I have held in my hands a ushabti, a little image of an Egyptian king, for which I would not take all the mummies and all the sarcophagi and all the cases of treasure of the museum. These things do not rightly belong to any one nation. They are the inheritance of the artists of the world. Your true worshipper of beauty does not stuff his house with specimens. He chooses one supreme example and it suffices him!'

But now a diversion was caused by the precipitate flight of the ox-eyed Swede. The ship had begun to get lively. The vibration had increased and the Aquatic was developing a long pitching movement that had an almost instantaneous effect on the attendance in the dining-room. The Italian marchese, his face as white as his camellia, was the second casualty at the Prince's table, leaving Jean, the Richboroughs, and the elderly Englishman at coffee with their host. At length, however, the Englishman rose.

'Prince,' he said, 'I never push fate too hard. I thank you for a truly Lucullan dinner . . . but I am going to bed.'

Richborough looked at his wife. 'That's what I call a lead,' he remarked. 'What about it, Aimée.'

'Why, if the Prince wouldn't think us very rude,' his wife fervently agreed, 'I think perhaps . . .'

Said Hussein laughed with a glint of white teeth and glanced interrogatively at Jean. An alluring vision of a hot-water bottle, a snug eiderdown, a book, and a reading-lamp flashed across her mind.

'Oh,' she cried whole-heartedly, 'I'd just love to go to bed . . . before it's too late!'

That made them all laugh and they broke up very cheerily. As Jean made her way down the room in front of the Prince, her eyes fell upon Cradock eating a lonely dinner at a table by himself, an open book propped up against a fruit-dish. She went past him, her head in the air, but she felt the stern blue eyes search her face.

She had the impression that there was something severely disapproving in their regard.

CHAPTER VI

A CRY IN THE NIGHT

A PECULIAR air of desolation reigns in a passenger ship on a rough evening at sea. It is as though the vessel were abandoned by her friends to fight it out alone with the old grey enemy. The dark and deserted decks, the empty public rooms ablaze with electric light, suggest a derelict borne across the face of the ocean at the mercy of the waves.

It was a wild night. One of the doors leading to the deck was banging about as Jean crossed the lobby outside the dining-room and an icy draught flattened her evening wrap about her. The decks were gleaming with wet, and above the pounding of the screws and the smacking of the dripping canvas screens she could hear the wash of water in the scuppers and the whistling of the wind in the wireless aerials high above the bridge.

Her way below led her down the companion, through the lounge, down another stair and across the second-class dining-room, given over as a nursery for the children on this 'one-class cruise.' It was barely ten o'clock, but already the lounge was deserted save for an occasional steward who flashed noiselessly past with a tray making for the line of cabins beyond. The Aquatic was pitching heavily now, rising in the water, quivering from stem to stern, and sinking back again with a vast shudder. Everything in the ship seemed to be in motion, doors rattling, woodwork creaking, metalwork jingling,

and as Jean in her descent came to the water-line she could see a tearing line of foam momentarily obscure the portholes.

Her cabin felt snug and warm. There was no sign of Simmons but a note, affixed to the pin-cushion, delicately explained her absence.

Dear Madam,

I am poorly and have retired which Madam knows I never could stand the sea. The hot-water bottle is in the bed and I have ask Steward to leave a small bottle of champagne for the case Madam needs it.

Yours respectfully
H. Simmons

Jean slipped out of her clothes and, taking up her pot of face cream, sat down in a kimono before the mirror. She ignored the gold-foiled bottle that rocked in the corded rack. The sea had no qualms for her: it would take a good deal of the Aquatic's pitching, she knew, to lay her low. She didn't relish the idea of sleeping with the porthole closed, but, as her cabin was situated so close to the water-line, she supposed there was no help for it. She could hook the door ajar, though, and, picking her way across the slanting floor, she fixed it.

Mechanically she greased her face, letting her mind run over the events of the day, as was her custom. How detestably rude the man Cradock had been! It had cost her something to make her little speech of acknowledgement to him; but the way he had received it! She wondered what the scandal had been that had lost him his post. Some intrigue with the wife of one of his chiefs, perhaps! Men . . .

With a sort of indignant energy she rubbed the cream into her smooth soft skin.

Prince Said Hussein finished his cigar in the smoke-room. Save for the steward making up his day's chits at the bar, he had the place to himself. Like all Orientals he seemed to possess the secret of indefinite spells of complete inactivity. A brandy-and-soda on the marble-topped table at his elbow, he sat erect on the squeaking leather settee, seemingly indifferent to the movement of the ship, looking straight before him, immobile save when, from time to time, he raised his large Habana to his mouth to draw on it luxuriantly. Thus he had remained for more than an hour since the dispersal of his dinner-party and thus, it seemed quite probable, he might remain until the bar closed at midnight.

Suddenly, with a blast of cold wind, the door swung open. Mr. Ismail stood swaying in the entrance, his small, dun-coloured hands grasping the framework while his feet negotiated the brass-bound bar. He was limp and his sallow face was almost greenish in hue. He came in, shutting the door behind him, and, crossing the slanting floor, dropped into a chair. Silently he beckoned the steward over and in an almost inaudible voice ordered a small bottle of Veuve Cliquot.

The Prince paid no attention to the newcomer. He might have been a thousand miles away from the pleasantly snug room with its oak-panelled walls and broad comfortable settees. Even the smart explosion as the steward released the cork of Ismail's pint of champagne seemingly failed to break in upon the other passenger's meditations.

Greedily Ismail emptied the glass which the deferential attendant filled. Then he took from his pocket a copy of the passenger list which had been distributed at dinner that evening and fell to studying it. He was

aroused from this occupation by the voice of his *vis-à-vis* across the room. For the first time the other passenger had spoken.

'I'll take another brandy-and-soda, steward,' he said.

At the sound of that voice Ismail looked up quickly. He saw the speaker languidly push his empty glass across the table. The green fire of the great emerald on the little finger of that slim and artistic hand blazed in the electric light. It drew the eye, as Jean Averil had noted, to the stunted finger shorn of a joint. Ismail started, half rose to his feet and sat down again. He put his hand out and refilled his glass, emptying the bottle. As the first, he drained the second glass at a draught. Then he stood up and unsteadily made for the door. As it slammed behind him, the Prince spoke again.

'Steward,' he said, 'I've changed my mind. I don't think I'll take that second drink after all.'

He glanced at his wrist and rose to his feet. 'A quarter past eleven,' he remarked. 'I'd no idea it was so late. Good-night!'

And he followed Mr. Ismail out upon the wet and windy deck.

Jean Averil stopped brushing her straight brown hair and raised her head to listen. Some one was tapping at the door of her cabin. She glanced at her travelling-clock. A quarter past eleven! Who could it be at that hour of the night? She laid down her brush and, shaking her hair back over her shoulders, went to the door. She opened it a little way, lifting the hook, and found herself gazing into the saddle-coloured face of Mr. Ismail.

Under the electric light his eyeballs glinted whitely. He was breathing hard and his face was troubled.

'Oh, pardon!' the Egyptian exclaimed on recognising her. 'I thought it was the cabin of Meestair Ceradock. Excuse me, Madame, I beg!'

'It's all right,' Jean smiled back at him. 'This used to be Mr. Cradock's cabin, you know, but we changed. His is D5, along the passage.'

'Thank you, Madame, and once again *mille pardons!*'

She closed the door. She shut it fast this time and locked it. She did not like the idea of saddle-skinned, dark-eyed gentlemen tiptoeing about outside her cabin at dead of night. She did not intend to do without fresh air, however, and with considerable trouble managed to get the porthole open. She noticed that the outside of the glass was not wet, so she hoped that the seas would not come in. Then she switched off the centre light, picked up a novel, and hopped into bed. The open port let in a great deal of cold air, she observed, as she lay there with her hair blowing about her ears, but, she told herself, it was better than being asphyxiated.

She tried to read; but all kinds of disturbances intervened to distract her attention. The cabin was aslant and, one by one, things became dislodged and began to roll. Behind the washstand rail her toilet bottles slid about, colliding noisily together, until, lest they should get broken, she was obliged to quit her warm bed and wedge them firm with a towel. Then with a crash her dressing-case descended from its stool and presently her golf-sticks rattled to the floor. She let them lie . . .

Somewhere close at hand a door had come unhooked and was banging at irregular intervals as the ship swung. The noise got on Jean's nerves. She found herself wait-

ing for each succeeding crash. At last she could endure it no longer. She slammed down her book and once more scrambled out of bed.

In kimono and slippers she peered round her cabin door. The alleyway was empty. D5 was dark, she noticed, the door open, hooked back. Along the passage, towards the entrance to the second-class saloon, the bathroom door was swinging to and fro. She ran along and made it fast, then, rather chilly, for an icy draught piped along the passage, returned to her bed.

She clasped the friendly hot-water bag to her and snuggled down under the warm bedclothes, relaxing her limbs and letting her body go with the steady movement of the ship. Sleep stole softly over her. With drowsy eyes she watched the detail of her cabin fade away, her ermine wrap swaying on a peg, the crimson roses that Rachel Hannington had given her rocking with the water in the basin, the lifebelt in its rack above her head mirrored in the long glass of the wardrobe. She stretched herself and felt at peace. Every thump of the screw, she told herself happily, was bringing her nearer to the land of eternal sunshine. She closed her eyes and a little vignette of the African coast that she had pictured for herself and carried in her mind for many days stood out clearly before her, a stretch of warm, golden sand, a cluster of waving palms against a deep blue sky . . .

'Women,' said Mr. Reginald Renton, one of the two wireless operators of the Aquatic, 'women are very like wireless, Mr. Cradock. Some days communication's dead easy and everything in the garden's lovely, and other times there's atmospherics and you're jammed

something cruel. Now there's a young lady I take out sometimes when we're on the Atlantic run — on the other side, she is, lives over Flatbush way, that's a suburb of N'York, u'know. I've known that girl . . .'

Here, loudly spluttering, the master of his fate from 8 P.M. to midnight called him and his anecdote was lost. Adjusting his ear-pieces the operator whipped a pencil out of an empty cigarette tin and drew his message pad towards him.

Perched high up on the topmost structure of the great ship, abaft the bridge, the isolation of the wireless cabin appealed to David Cradock's hermit soul. It was like being in a tower topping a lofty building, a lighthouse sort of place where one could make friends with the sky and the rushing wind. If you looked out of the narrow door, you could descry ahead, dimly silhouetted against the binnacle light, the muffled figure of the officer of the watch on the bridge. If you looked aloft, you could see the black, spark-specked pall that the towering smoke-stacks spread out above the ship. Not since he had quitted, six weeks before, on one of his rare visits to England, the solitude of his lonely house among the brownstone hills beyond the Nile had David Cradock found the peace that he had rediscovered in the wireless room. He had come up there after dinner to send a wireless and had remained to smoke a pipe and chat with the blond and engaging youth in charge. That is to say he listened, sitting quietly smoking, rocking his knee in his hands, while Renton, as and when his duties permitted, discoursed.

'Eleven-twenty!' announced the operator, glancing at the clock and scribbled down the time on the message he had taken while, with his free hand, he punched a

bell. A steward came and carried the message away. At his arrival and departure the wind tore like a fiend at the door.

'We'll be late getting into Naples if this weather lasts,' the youth observed.

The door opened again, admitting all the tumult of the night. A trim figure, his thin evening clothes fluttering about him, stood on the threshold.

'Good-evening,' the new arrival said pleasantly. 'Can I send a wireless to Cairo?'

'Only via Naples, sir,' the operator replied. 'We shan't be in touch with the land station at Alex. before Tuesday morning. It would be quicker and cheaper to cable from Naples. We should be in before noon tomorrow.'

'I dare say you're right,' the other rejoined placidly. Then, catching sight of Cradock: 'Why, hullo! I didn't see you there. I'd heard that you were on board . . .'

'Good-evening, Said Hussein,' the Englishman returned without enthusiasm.

'Been to England?'

'Yes!'

'Going back to Luxor, eh?'

'Yes!'

'How's old Lomax?'

'Very fit!'

'Is he coming out this year?'

'No!'

Cradock's manner was distant almost to rudeness. But the Prince affected not to remark it. He began to speak of the last time he had seen Lomax and described a rock tomb that they had visited together. He remained keeping up this one-sided conversation with

Cradock until a step sounded on the deck without and the relief operator appeared.

Cradock stood up. 'Midnight!' he announced. 'I think I'll turn in. Good-night, Renton. Good-night, Said Hussein.'

'I'm coming, too,' the Prince replied. The two men descended the heaving companion together, Renton at their heels.

Abruptly Jean Averil sat up in bed. Her heart was hammering madly. She cast frightened glances about her. Her book lay face downward on the eiderdown: the electric light still burned at her bedside. She was back in the creaking, vibrating cabin, the ship rising and falling, the screws drumming steadily.

She looked at her clock. Five minutes past twelve! She must have dozed; but now she was awake, wide awake and horribly frightened. She listened; but she heard only the thumping of her heart. That sound, that terrifying sound that had startled her from sleep, that yet lingered, indefinable, in her ears, did not recur.

In a sort of panic she sprang to the door. She was barefoot, in her nightdress; but she did not think of that. She looked out. The alleyway was empty as she had last seen it, the electric globe quivering slightly to the shaking of the ship and burning yellow.

She darted across to D5. It was dark as before, the door hooked back. She put out her hand to the switch by the door and turned on the light. The cabin was empty. Then she saw a piece of paper, twisted up into a cocked hat, lying just over the threshold. Mechanically she picked it up and stood irresolute.

Suddenly, from behind, a heavy hand was laid on her

shoulder. She felt its warmth on her skin through the flimsy silk of her nightdress. She was spun round. Cradock's stern eyes looked into hers, searching her face. His mouth was grim.

'What are you doing here?' he demanded. He did not relax his grasp on her shoulder, but, holding her from him, peered past her into his cabin. His face softened; but then he saw the note in her hand. His eyes grew angry and he snatched the paper from her. He pointed to the superscription: '*Mr. D. Cradock.*'

She fell back against the door-jamb. He gave her a glance full of suspicion, then unfolded the note and read it. Crushing it in his hand, he thrust his face into hers.

'Let me warn you once and for all,' he said, 'not to meddle in my affairs. There's nothing in my correspondence to interest you or anybody else.'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' she gasped.

'And this note in your hand?'

'I picked it up off the floor. I was frightened. I came to ask you if you had heard anything.'

She felt his eyes on her face.

'What should I have heard?'

'Someone cried out. It seemed to me . . . I thought I heard a scream.'

'When? Where?'

'Just now. It seemed to come from outside.'

Beneath its gossamer covering her bosom rose and fell rapidly. She glanced down at her nightdress and the colour mounted in her cheeks.

'Let me go back to my room!' she said; for he still stood between her and the door of her cabin. But he did not budge. He remained staring at her sombrely. Her arm went out and she struck him across the chest.

'Let me pass, I say!' she cried.

On that he stepped aside.

She fled back to her cabin and he heard her lock the door. He stood impassive, twisting the note in his fingers. Then, as if struck by a sudden idea, he roused himself from his lethargy and made headlong down the sloping corridor by the way he had come.

CHAPTER VII

IN WHICH JEAN AVERIL PROVES HERSELF A WOMAN

When Jean opened her eyes the next morning, the Aquatic heaved no more. The ermine wrap in her cabin hung motionless on its peg. The open porthole framed a circle of what appeared to be astonishingly steady yellow wall. There was the sound of heavy carts rumbling over cobble-stones and the jabber of many voices rent the air.

'Naples, Madam!'

Simmons stood at the bedside, a tea-tray in her hand. In her neat black dress she looked grimmer and more angular than ever. She was as full of corners as a rhomboid: and, though no living man could speak with authority to the point, there are grounds for surmising that her undraped figure would have sent a Cubist into ecstasies. But no such thoughts occurred to Jean Averil. To her Simmons, in her black alpaca, was the goddess of the morning, rosy-fingered dawn in person.

She stirred herself drowsily. She felt very tired. Somewhere in her mind there rustled, like a bird in a thicket, some unpleasant memory to which she was unwilling to awake.

'Quite a to-do in the night, Madam! Did you hear it? They stopped the ship and I don't know what. They do say as one of the passengers fell overboard . . .'

A stern sunburnt face, angry condemning eyes — how blue they had blazed, to be sure! — came before

Jean's slowly returning consciousness. Why had they stared at her thus fiercely?

'I'd better put out your blue serge, Madam. Raining cats and dogs it is. Nice weather for sunny Italy, I must say!'

'*What are you doing here?*'

Who had spoken those words to her? It was as though she could still feel that brutal grip on her shoulder. Jean raised herself on her elbow, looking sleepily about her.

'And no bath, unless, of course, you wish to bathe in water from the harbour, Madam, which I can scarcely recommend. I looked over the side first thing. Pea-soup I call it!'

Simmons was moving about setting the cabin to rights. Jean sat up in bed. In a rush the memories of the night flowed back. Had it been a nightmare? That shriek, Cradock and his mad accusation . . . What had Simmons said about a passenger falling overboard . . . ?'

A tap at the door. Simmons opened, a grim and suspicious watch-dog. She turned and spoke to Jean.

'It's from the Captain, Madam. His compliments and he would like to see you in his cabin as soon as possible.'

'The Captain, Simmons? But I'm not dressed. What does he want with me?'

'I can't say, I'm shore, Madam. There's a steward outside with the message. It's urgent, he says.'

'Tell him I'll come as soon as I'm dressed, Simmons!' said Jean. 'I wonder what it is . . . '

'Somethink about your passport, I shouldn't wonder, Madam. There's a lot of foreign men come aboard and taken possession of the smoke-room to stamp the pass-

ports for those that want to go ashore. Pack of stuff and nonsense, I say . . .'

Jean did not discuss her maid's ingenious theory. She was thinking of that cry in the night.

'Did you say that a passenger had fallen overboard, Simmons?'

'So the stewardess was telling me, Madam.'

'Who was it, do you know?' She waited painfully for the answer.

'The stewardess didn't rightly know, Madam!'

In a fever of anxiety Jean hurried on her clothes. Cradock must have repeated his crazy imputation against her to the Captain. She felt her anger blaze up hotly within her.

The steward conducted her to the bridge. It was a miserable morning as she stepped out on deck. A grey warm rain blotted out Naples and wet clung to everything. Over the rail gleaming umbrellas were seen to dot the quays and the slate roofs of the long low sheds glistened blackly. To seaward the eternal smoke wreath of Vesuvius was hidden in a swollen wrap of heavy grey-white cloud. Nondescript figures mouched about the decks, those seedy denizens of the water-front at any great seaport whose attire begins with a uniform cap and ends in frayed civilian trousers and down-at-heel boots. The Aquatic was coaling. Long flat barges lay on the greasy water under her steep sides and endless files of gnome-like figures, hooded with sacks against the rain, passed up and down the planks, wicker baskets on their shoulders.

Back of the bridge, between it and the wireless room, was the little white deck-house sacred to the Captain. The steward rapped briskly on the door. 'Come!'

roared a voice. The first person that Jean saw on entering was Cradock.

He was leaning against a locker facing the door, a lounging figure in his shabby old tweeds, his brown hands playing with a pipe. The face he turned towards her was expressionless; but his eyes were watchful.

The Captain sat back in his chair, his cap pushed off his forehead showing a tousle of greyish hair. A square-built man with a red-brick face, he wore that air of disarming ingenuousness peculiar to those that follow the sea. On the steward's announcement he stood up.

'Sorry to inconvenience you so early in the morning, Mrs. Averil,' he began like an awkward schoolboy, 'but a tragic affair took place on board last night and I understand that you can possibly throw some light on it. Oh, pardon me, let me introduce Mr. David Cradock . . .'

There was a glint of humour in the blue eyes as Cradock bowed. The girl inclined her head very stiffly and thereafter ignored him. Furthermore, she manipulated the swing-chair that the Captain indicated to her in such a way as to present her back to Cradock.

'Mrs. Averil,' said the Captain, 'I believe you were disturbed in the night by someone crying out. Is that correct?'

'Yes,' Jean replied. She knew that Cradock was looking at her and she felt the colour warm her cheeks.

'What sort of a cry was it?'

'Like a long shriek, it seemed to be. I was half asleep at the time; but it woke me up.'

'Where did it seem to come from?'

She hesitated. 'I can't really tell you. I woke up suddenly knowing that somebody had cried out.'

The Captain consulted Cradock with a glance.

'The officer of the watch heard nothing on the bridge,' he remarked dubiously.

'Quite,' Cradock agreed. 'But it was a dirty night. Mrs. Averil's cabin is a goodish way aft, Captain, and if he went off C deck she might have heard a scream.'

'Not unless the ports were open, Mr. Cradock. But the order was given from the bridge at eight-forty-five last evening for all ports to be closed as the ship was getting lively.'

'But *my* porthole was open,' Jean interposed. 'The cabin was stuffy and I couldn't sleep . . .'

'I see,' remarked the Captain. 'That would account for it. It should also give us approximately the spot where he went over, probably from C deck, as you say, Mr. Cradock.'

He turned to Jean. 'I don't think I need detain you any longer, Mrs. Averil.'

Jean arose. 'Mayn't I know what has happened?' she asked.

'Good gracious,' the Captain cried. 'I thought you knew all about it. One of our passengers either fell or jumped overboard last night, a Mr. Ismail . . .'

'Mr. Ismail!' Jean exclaimed blankly. She had a sudden vision of troubled eyes gazing at her out of a brown face.

'But . . .' she began and now she turned and regarded Cradock. He met her gaze unflinching.

'But what . . .?' demanded the Captain.

'But I saw Mr. Ismail last night!'

'When?' Both men spoke together.

'It was a quarter past eleven. I was going to bed. He knocked at my cabin. He thought it was Mr. Cradock's: it was, before Mr. Cradock changed with me. I explained his mistake and he went away.'

'Did he say what he wanted with me?' Cradock asked.

Jean did not look at him. 'No,' she answered curtly.

'Did he *seem* all right?' the Captain demanded.

'It struck me that he looked upset. But I thought it was the sea. He was a bad colour.'

The two men exchanged glances.

'Well,' observed the Captain, 'it's a sad business and I fear you must have had a frightening experience, Mrs. Averil. Thank you for telling me so frankly what you know.'

He was moving forward to open the door when Cradock spoke.

'One minute, Captain. It would be as well if you would request Mrs. Averil to say nothing about her experience to the other passengers. Indeed, it would be best if she did not discuss the matter at all.'

Jean looked with astonishment at the Captain. Masters of ships, she had always heard, were laws unto themselves, endowed with all kinds of strange powers of life and death, who brooked suggestion or dictation from no one. To her amazement the Captain acquiesced at once in the proposal of this sombre and shabby landsman.

'I should be glad if you would regard that as a personal request from myself, Mrs. Averil,' he said with authority. 'Will you please say nothing to anyone about your experience last night or about our talk here this morning?'

'I will say nothing,' she promised. She nodded to the Captain and passed out on deck. Cradock she did not even look at, although he held the door for her.

On the promenade deck she fell in with the Prince.

His clothes visibly bespoke his intention of going ashore, the grey felt hat, the smart grey overcoat with a buttonhole of Parma violets, the spats, the gloves and cane. He was pacing up and down with a disconsolate air. His face cleared as his eye lighted upon Jean's dainty figure.

'Ah,' he cried, 'I've been looking for you everywhere. Have compassion on a lonely man, Mrs. Averil, and let me give you luncheon on land. We can't go far, as we sail at 4 P.M.; but at least we can take a drive and, if Giulio is still *maître d'hôtel* at the Splendide, we shan't fare too badly.'

She was glad to accept his invitation. Her experience of the night had blunted her mind. The news of Ismail's disappearance had profoundly shocked her and had lent fresh resonance, like an echo taken up and repeated, to that dreadful cry that yet lingered in her memory. Her thoughts ran gently on the kindly, brown creature. It made her heart ache to think that, even as he had eagerly chatted to her of the treasures of Egypt, he might have been carrying in his mind the fixed intention of suicide. And the mystery they were making of his death galled her; for it brought her thoughts back to Cradock whom she was anxious to forget . . .

The rain had ceased and a few rays of wan sunshine now lightly gilded the distant curve of the bay. The air was clean and spring-like and, as the weather cleared, one by one the gems of that peerless coast peeped out through the melting mist.

A brief delay to get Jean's passport stamped and they went ashore. At the foot of the canvas-covered gangway a handsome Fiat waited. On the seat was a great bunch of Parma violets tied up with mauve ribbon.

'You made sure that I would accept your invitation,' hazarded Jean, burying her face in the rain-wet flowers.

'I gambled on your kindness of heart,' gallantly rejoined the Prince.

He proved himself the most delightful of companions. He was devoted without being flirtatious: amusing, yet not frivolous: interesting and never a bore. He had that knack of forestalling a woman's wishes which so few younger men possess. The specially ordered car, the bouquet, were not the only instances of his forethought. At the hotel overlooking the bay, their luncheon, with a special menu, selected in advance by some magic of her host, awaited them, and, when they sat under the orange trees on the terrace to take their coffee, a band of picturesque creatures with mandolins and guitars appeared and regaled them with Neapolitan folk-songs.

There was nothing of the Oriental that Jean could discover about the Prince and yet he did not deny his race. They drove back to the steamer through the old town: — 'It will give you,' the Prince told Jean, 'a foretaste of the East!' Indeed, as they bumped in the car over the broken granite setts of the steep and narrow streets and saw the craftsmen at work — the tanners bending over their hides, the meat-broilers holding pans frizzling with oil over braziers of olive wood — in open booths set up in the black and beetling entrances of the tall, old houses, the dark little cafés fronting on the teeming lanes, the mysterious side alleys, Jean could feel the suggestion of the Orient.

'It is a bit of the East as the tourists know it,' the Prince agreed, 'the East as you find it in great marketplaces like Port Said or Cairo, where every second man is a non-Moslem, a Syrian, an Armenian, a Greek, or a

Jew. But there is the East of the Arab quarter of Cairo where life still proceeds to-day on the staid, well-ordered lines laid down by our Prophet many hundreds of years before a white man set foot in America, where such ancient shibboleths as the fear of God, respect for parents, charity to the poor, are yet held in honour. Perhaps one day I may be privileged to raise for you a corner of the mantle that covers from Western eyes the inner circle of the Moslem world.'

'It isn't much of a world for us women by all accounts,' Jean ventured, laughing at him out of her grey eyes, but wondering secretly how he would take the remark. He laughed with perfect good-humour.

'By American standards I suppose it isn't. And yet, you know, even in the East, the men don't have it all their own way. If you hear a peasant singing in the fields, it is generally all about the beauty of some village belle, her fickleness, her coldness. I sometimes think the difference is that in the West the women parade their power over men, while in the East . . . well, it's like the ladies of an Arab household: you don't see them, but they're there!'

Most of the shore-going passengers seemed to have returned by the time Jean and the Prince got back on board. At the saloon entrance they ran into Mrs. Richborough. The banker's wife, in a most elaborate white serge costume with four rows of pearls, was buying beads of a pedlar whose large and pleading eyes would have drawn tears from a stone. The matron's unit of barter was a dollar, and 'I give you one dollar!' with uplifted finger, was her only rejoinder to the vendor's torrential and almost lachrymose entreaties. As Jean approached, she ran up to her eagerly.

'My *dear*,' she said impressively, 'we were so *thrilled* to hear that your neighbour at table was that poor Mr. What's-his-name who jumped overboard last night. *Do* tell me about him! Did he confide in you?'

'Hardly,' Jean confessed. 'I only met him once, at luncheon yesterday.'

'What was he like?'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything about him,' Jean retorted. 'He seemed a nice little man . . .'

She was conscious that someone was looking at her from the side. She glanced up. Cradock's eyes were fixed on her face. He was talking to Mr. Simonou, but watching her over the Greek's shoulder.

'That nice Mr. Simonou,' Mrs. Richborough resumed volubly, 'says he was a *very, very* interesting man and highly educated. He was a *great* friend of his. He'd known him for years, hadn't you, Mr. Simonou?'

His sleeve plucked, Mr. Simonou turned and his yellow face showed up behind Mrs. Richborough's flaming henna panache. There were violet rings round his eyes and he looked very washed-out. Jean remembered that she had not seen him since luncheon on the previous day.

'A very dear friend,' Simonou sighed. 'I can't bear to think of it. The sea was too much for me yesterday and I went to bed after luncheon and didn't even get up for dinner. Who knows, if I'd been about, but that this shocking affair would never have happened!'

A skinny, unwashed hand, festooned with strings of beads, was thrust into the group, two mournful black eyes behind it.

'I give you one dollar!' cried Mrs. Richborough shrilly.

'Very leetle, signora, very poor man!' the pedlar moaned.

The Prince joined the group. 'Which one do you like?' he asked Mrs. Richborough.

'The white corals,' said the lady. 'But he wants too much.'

The Prince took the string of corals and fixed his reddish eyes upon the Neapolitan. '*Cinque lire!*' he announced. He handed the beads to Mrs. Richborough.

'*Ma, Altessa . . .*' the man quavered.

'Give him five lire,' the Prince told the matron. And smiling broadly the pedlar pocketed the greasy note.

Jean had watched the scene with interest. All through their day on shore it had been the same. This extraordinary man was never at a loss. He spoke Italian as fluently as he spoke English. He was never ostentatious, never blustering; but wherever he went he imposed his will. There was a suggestion of unbending strength behind his perfect suavity.

'You certainly know how to deal with them,' observed Mrs. Richborough, fondling her corals. 'You ought to see Henry, Prince. He's a child in their hands and he reckons himself a smart business man.'

The Prince sidled up to Jean. 'Take me away,' he pleaded, 'or Mrs. Richborough will make me meet that terrible Greek!'

'Do you mean Mr. Simonou, Prince? Why, he's all right.'

'I'm sorry I can't agree with you,' the Prince rejoined. 'He's the most devastating bounder and I've avoided him successfully for four seasons in Cairo. Come and have tea!'

After that Jean spent much of her time with Prince Said Hussein. They took long walks together on deck. After Naples the sea was as smooth as glass and on a steady keel the Aquatic headed for the North African coast. The air was balmy and only the gleaming snow that, like a white cap on the silver locks of an old man, emerged from the clouds resting on the Cretan mountains, told of past days of wintry weather.

Cradock she hardly saw at all; indeed, she had all but forgotten him until one evening — it was their last night on board — to her boundless astonishment he came up and spoke to her. She had dressed early and the second call for dinner had not sounded when she emerged from the saloon entrance and stood on deck for a moment contemplating the blazing array of stars. Suddenly Cradock was at her side.

'Mrs. Averil,' he said, 'I've been looking for an opportunity to speak to you. But you are never alone.'

She remained silent, her mind busy with the problem with which this unexpected step of his confronted her.

'You must think me a frightful boor. I want to apologise for what I said to you that night, the night that Ismail disappeared, for that and other things. I can't explain, but if you knew the true circumstances I think you would understand.'

She did not speak. She was surprised at the strength of the resentment welling up within her. She had not realised, for she had almost contrived to put the whole incident out of her head, how bitterly his churlishness, his insulting imputation, had offended her.

'Before we go our different ways to-morrow,' he said, 'I should like to know that you have forgiven me.'

There was a hesitancy about his words, a certain

humbleness that contrasted vividly with the curt, cynical manner that he had always displayed towards her. It might have touched her; but she was a woman and she took the advantage. Besides, the suggestion of intimacy that his appeal for forgiveness presumed between them outraged her.

The quaint old English ditty that was the dinner call rang out along the deck. She turned to enter the saloon and confronted him.

'Neither your manners nor your record,' she blazed out furiously, 'entitle you to any consideration from a woman.'

The fleeting glimpse she had of his face as she brushed past him made her regret her hasty words as soon as she had spoken them. He paled beneath his desert tan and the pain that came into his eyes seemed to pierce her like a sharp sword. In silence he turned and walked away and she, with flushed cheeks, went down to dinner.

By noon the next day they were at Alexandria.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. BASTABLE HAS A CALLER

Todros Effendi, clerk to Mr. John Villiers Bastable, C.M.G., gazed dreamily out of the open window of his office into the verdant gardens of the Ministry. It was almost noonday and very warm. High in the glowing azure sky the great kites, assiduous scavengers of Cairo streets, wheeled and squawked, and on the gleaming stretches of green turf beneath the palms the crested hoopoes pecked and chattered.

Under the window, in the little tiled forecourt, the fountain mingled its murmur with the low mutter of voices that, like the bass of an organ, is a perpetual rumbling accompaniment of Egyptian life. In the shade of the pillared portico the *boab*, white-turbaned, black-robed janitor, squatted on his hunkers, yarning in drawling undertones with a crouching semicircle of relations and friends, while across the drive, where a line of cars was drawn up on the clean, sandy road, a knot of European and native chauffeurs gossiped under the acacias.

But Todros Effendi saw nothing of this familiar scene. He was plunged in a delicious day-dream. Undisturbed the flies promenaded over his large brown face. He saw himself, attired in his lavender tie, brown suit, and cloth-topped boots of Sunday wear, calling in a motor-car, the Ford of his cousin Boulos, to pay his respects to the family of one Mariam, daughter of old Morcos, of the State Railways, a plump damsel whose jet-black eyes and appetising curves filled his soul with delight.

Old Morcos was grasping; but there were certain undeniable social advantages, Todros told himself, in having a ministerial official for a son-in-law. As yet, it was true, he was but a subaltern functionary; but what shall be denied to good looks — his dull eye fluttered a well-pleased regard over his portly form tightly crammed into the worn alpaca suit — ambition, and the intelligent exploitation of one's opportunities? His pay was, of course, at present miserably inferior to his attainments; but he had, or could represent himself as having, which was often as good, the car of Mr. John Villiers Bastable, C.M.G., a claim that sometimes had a definite pecuniary value in the market of Egyptian public life. And there was always Mr. Voronian, his Armenian friend at the Café Sheesha . . .

The angry whirr of the telephone at his elbow dissipated the reverie of Todros Effendi. He lifted the receiver. '*Min?*' ('Who is it?') he asked. Then, suavely in English: 'Please to wait for a minute. I go to see.' He snatched up his tarbush from the desk before him, stood to survey himself for an instant in a mirror on the wall, laid his cigarette aside, and in his brown button boots tripped across the floor to his chief's room.

'Meestair Ceradock on the telephone, sair,' he announced. 'He ask can he come, please, and see you.'

Bastable glanced up through his horn spectacles. With his grey moustache and grizzled hair, his dark suit and his rather aloof bearing, he was a good type of British Government official. He wore a harassed mien which his fellows at the Turf Club could understand who, two years before, had seen Cairo flame with red posters offering '£10,000 Reward' for information leading to the arrest of the assassins of his predecessor in office.

There was a certain air of disillusionment about him, too peculiar to many Egyptian civil servants of the old school who have never realised that Cromer rules no more.

'Certainly, Todros Effendi,' Bastable replied. 'He can come along at once.'

The clerk returned to the anteroom and gave the message. He was smiling happily to himself as he hung up the receiver. He glanced at his wrist-watch. Half-past eleven! In two hours he would be free to go to the Café Sheesha. He hoped that Mr. Voronian would be there as usual. Mr. Voronian should be generous to-day. His mind flashed back to his slender bank balance, slowly increasing, piastre by piastre, and he smiled again.

'David!' cried Bastable, springing up from his chair as Cradock was ushered in, ten minutes later. 'See that both doors are closed, will you? I'm not sure of that Copt clerk of mine. Well?'

Cradock closed the outer door and the heavily padded door within. In Egypt doors — single doors — as well as walls, have ears.

'Well,' he said, 'I'm back, John!'

'When did you get in?'

'By the Aquatic yesterday. I reached Cairo last night.'

'Good passage?'

'All right, after Naples.'

'Cigarette?'

'Thanks. I prefer a pipe.'

Cradock came round and sat on the desk beside Bastable, who had resumed his seat. There was a moment's silence while the visitor crammed his pipe. When

he had got it lighted at last, he said: 'Things are even worse than you and I anticipated, John.'

'I feared as much,' Bastable rejoined, taking off his spectacles and wiping them. 'The Antiquities Department are in a proper stew about it.'

'And with reason,' Cradock retorted. 'There's all sorts of stuff leaving Egypt and coming on the market that the Department has never set eyes on, I swear. I went round all the big dealers in London, Paris, Berlin — yes, the Germans are in the game again! — and Rome, and I was flabbergasted. Right and left the excavations are being pillaged. I was shown Middle Empire things, Tel el-Amarna statuettes and pottery, and earlier stuff in wood from Sakkara and the Pyramids, selected pieces, every one a marvel. As it's obviously stolen from the excavations, most of it, one can't tell its origin, of course, but at Wetherby's in Town they were selling a canopic jar which I'll swear is the fellow of a broken one we found last year clearing that noble's tomb we're working on now over at Deir el-Bahari. Mind you, we warned the Department that it would happen . . .'

'The Department does its best,' Bastable put in, 'but they're understaffed. And their inspectors, devoted as they are, are known. That's why we roped you in, Dave . . .'

'Once your damned Government started trying to get into its hands the whole of excavation,' Cradock persisted stubbornly, 'and allowing the foreigner to dig only on terms ensuring that the best of everything should go to the Cairo Museum, it was inevitable that the contraband trade would increase. You know, there's always a market for rare and beautiful antikas — I

mean the real museum stuff; and when the Gyppie Government bottled up the regular source of supply, it was virtually certain that the underground channel would take its place. There's always been a certain amount of haphazard excavation on the sly and all of us have had occasional pilfering on the *chantier*. But this time we're up against a big thing, a formidable organisation and no mistake. And, believe me, John, they'll stick at nothing!'

'You mean . . . Seaton?' said Bastable.

'Seaton?' repeated the other sharply. 'What about Seaton?'

'Haven't you heard?'

'Damn it, I've been travelling for the past six days. What's happened to Seaton?'

'He shot himself in a telephone box at Monte Carlo.'

Cradock's face was stony. He took his pipe out of his mouth and then very deliberately stuck it back, his teeth gritting hard on the stem.

'When was this?'

Bastable consulted the calendar on his desk.

'To-day's the 26th,' he answered. 'Let's see, it will be a week to-morrow.'

'The 20th January, then,' Cradock observed grimly, 'the day the Aquatic sailed. Where did it happen?'

'At the Florida Restaurant, late in the evening.'

'Are you sure it was suicide?'

Bastable shrugged his shoulder. 'You know what Monte Carlo is. The Embassy in Paris got us a few particulars. Seaton was dining that night . . .' — he glanced sideways at his visitor and made a deliberate pause — 'with Aronfels!'

Cradock's brown hand gripped the desk. He stooped down to Bastable. 'The meeting *did* take place, then?' he said.

'I'd hoped that *you* would be able to tell me that. Seaton was called away during dinner to speak to someone called Mayer, a man who had lunched with him at his hotel that day. The telephone at the Florida, it seems, is rather remotely situated under the staircase round a turn at the end of the hall. There was nobody in the immediate vicinity, apparently, when Seaton entered the box, and the next thing that happened was that the chausseur at the front door heard a shot and Seaton was found dead in the box with an automatic on the floor — so, at least, the official version runs. Obviously one person who can throw a good deal of light on the mystery is Mayer, as he was the last person to speak to Seaton, presumably. But Mayer has vanished!'

'I see!' commented Cradock. 'And I don't give sixpence for his chance of being alive, either!'

'What we do know, however,' Bastable added, 'is that this man Mayer is a private detective.'

'What does Aronfels say?'

Bastable laughed drily. 'He didn't wait to be heard. He caught the night train to Paris, crossed to London by air, and took the next steamer back to America. He seems to have got the wind up properly.'

'I'm not surprised,' remarked Cradock. 'By those letters of Ramosi's that you intercepted, John, we know that there were at least three dealers invited to this meeting with him in January — Seaton, Aronfels, and Ismail. Would it astonish you to hear that not one but two of them have committed suicide already?'

'Two?' cried Bastable. 'Who's the other?'

'Ismail!'

Bastable whistled. 'How did it happen?'

'On the Aquatic. He joined her at Monte Carlo. If I'd only known that he was on board! I went to Paris to see him, as we arranged, but he had shut up his shop and gone away without leaving an address. He disappeared overboard the night before we got to Naples. A woman passenger heard a scream, and that was the only direct evidence we had of the tragedy apart from his empty bunk. I made every possible enquiry — I had to take the Captain into my confidence — but without result. What haunts me, John, is that, less than an hour before he disappeared, the poor devil was hunting the ship for me. And all the time I was up in the wireless room having a yarn with the operator. Ismail left me a note in my cabin: but he doesn't say what he wants. Here, you can read it for yourself . . .'

From his pocket he produced a folded half-sheet of note-paper with a flag and 'S.S. Aquatic' at the top and handed it to Bastable. The latter put on his spectacles and read the pencilled scrawl.

It must that I see you most importantly to-night. No matter what hour he is, come, I supplicate you, to C deck where I walk. It is most urgent.

It was signed '*Ismail*,' and in French was added: '*Ne me manquez pas, je vous en supplie.*'

David Cradock leaned over and picked up the sheet of paper. He put it back in his pocket. Then, folding his arms, he straightened himself up and looked his friend in the eye.

'Foul play, John!' he said.

The other's care-worn face seemed a trifle more haggard.

'I quite agree,' he rejoined. 'But how are you going to prove it?'

Cradock squared his chin. 'They're devilish astute, whoever they are,' he said. A pause and he added: 'Simonou was on board with us!'

'That's suspicious enough in itself,' commented Bastable, toying with his glasses. 'That yellow rat has been in the contraband business for years!'

'I found Ismail's note within a minute or two of that cry of his being heard,' said Cradock. 'I went straight off to C deck. It was deserted. Ismail's cabin was on the same deck, but he wasn't in it. Do you know what I did before I alarmed the bridge? I went to Simonou's cabin. Whatever the man's record, it is clear he was not in this. It was a roughish night and the fellow was absolutely prostrate with seasickness, almost in a state of collapse. Then I gave the alarm, and they stopped the ship and turned on the searchlights. But, with her speed and the seas running as they were, the poor chap hadn't a chance. They found no trace of him.'

'Were there any other Egyptians on board?'

'Only one other that I know of . . .'

'Who was that?'

'Said Hussein.'

Bastable glanced at the other's face. It was impassive. Silently the two men exchanged a look. 'And *he's* got a perfect alibi,' Cradock added rather hastily. 'He was up in the wireless room with me until midnight when the operator was relieved and the three of us went below together. We parted company on the promenade deck, but the operator, a thoroughly reliable young

fellow, says he escorted Hussein as far as his cabin. They must have been together at the very moment that the scream was heard. So that counts Said Hussein out. But I am certain within myself that Ismail was pushed off that ship, and I believe that the Captain, though he won't admit it, thinks so too. Does a man *scream* when he jumps overboard? Not on your life! He slips over quietly.'

'And this meeting between Ramosi and his friends?'

Cradock's features darkened. 'I'm afraid I failed you there, John. I drew a blank. It was a pretty hopeless task from the first. But from the fact that, from our joint information, we now know that Aronfels, Seaton, and Ismail must all have been at Monte Carlo together, we can assume, I believe, that the meeting took place somewhere on the Riviera.'

'And Ramosi?'

'As far as I was able to discover, he's totally unknown in Europe. He operates here. We must discover his identity here. Have you had any luck?'

Bastable shook his head.

'Then we shall have to take up the hunt again,' Cradock announced decisively. He thought for a moment. 'Our trouble has always been that, as we don't know what we're going to find excavating, we can never trace anything that our native diggers pinch.'

He broke off and shot a humorous glance at Bastable out of the corners of his blue eyes. Then he whispered in his ear. Bastable bent his head and a broad grin spread across his face.

'Well, I don't see why not,' he said. Cradock pointed to the telephone. 'Ring 'em up now and fix it,' he suggested.

But Bastable shook his head. 'I don't trust the telephone for this sort of thing,' he remarked. 'Between ourselves, I'm not too happy in my mind about Todros Effendi, that clerk of mine. For some time past it has struck me that he has been altogether too interested in my callers. When you used to come here before you left for home, I noticed it. I'll see our friends myself this afternoon and send you word to the Continental.'

But Cradock seemed not to hear. He was gravely contemplating the door leading to the anteroom. 'What time does that clerk of yours go off, eh, John?'

'Half-past one. Why?'

'I'd like you to send him straight to me at the Continental. Don't give him a letter. Give him something to bring me: — that bluebook will do. Tell him it's essential that I should get it without delay.'

'My dear Dave, what is precisely the idea?'

'The idea is that, as soon as he goes off duty here, Todros Effendi should come straight to the Continental. *C'est compris?*'

Bastable laughed. 'What a mysterious devil you are! All right, I'll send him along. But don't rush off like that! It's not twelve yet. I'm lunching at Gezira at one or I'd ask you to come and have a bite with me over at the Mahomet Ali Club. What sort of a time did you have at home?'

'Oh, all right. But I'm glad to be back. London's so crowded . . .'

'Unsociable devil!'

'Big cities scare me, John. They make me feel so lonely.'

Bastable burst out laughing. 'Well, for a fellow that

lives out in the desert alone for three or four years at a stretch . . .'

'I know it sounds perfectly lunatic,' Cradock rejoined apologetically, 'but it's true. In the midst of all these millions of people rushing about on their own particular business I feel lost, confounded, like . . . like Paolo and Francesca, in the Inferno, knowing no rest. Up there on the old *Gebel* I love my solitude, but at home, God! it weighs me down like a diver's dress. Sometimes I find myself envying the very old women one sees fussing in and out of busses, because they have a home to go to and I have none.'

'It's nobody's fault but your own, old boy . . .'

'I know, I know, John. You see, I don't get on with my father. He took that old affair very hard, and he's sore with me because I won't get married and produce an heir. But I'm too uncouth for polite society. I can't make pretty speeches to women.' His face clouded over. 'It seems to me I can't speak to women at all . . .'

Bastable walked round the desk and tapped him on the shoulder. 'Poor old Dave,' he said, 'that was a devilish bad knock, wasn't it? And it's so long ago. Let's see, getting on for twelve years, isn't it?'

Cradock nodded. 'I'm over it now,' he affirmed.

Bastable looked at him intently for a moment. 'By the way,' he said slowly, 'talking of Said Hussein, Nadia Alexandrovna's back!'

Cradock whipped round. 'Nadia!' he faltered. 'But the decree of expulsion?'

Bastable threw up his hands. 'Egypt has her own government to-day,' he retorted. 'And Nadia Alexandrovna has returned.'

With bowed head Cradock gathered up his hat and

stick from a chair. 'Well,' he said slowly, 'I'd better be getting on. You'll send Todros along, John, and let me know about that other matter in due course? So long!'

As he reached the door, he raised his head, straightening himself up as though to face the outer world once more. Bastable's eyes were sad as he watched him go.

CHAPTER IX

THE CAFÉ OF THE PERSIAN PIPES

If you desire to smoke the *sheesha*, which is the Persian pipe; if you wish to find the purest *dumbak*, which is the pale Persian tobacco, freshly washed, you will go to the Café Sheesha, across from the green Esbekia Gardens facing the Opera Square.

Ahmed, the pipe attendant, will bring you the glass vessel with its yards of curving pipe and deftly flick the lumps of glowing charcoal upon the amber flakes that, tight-packed, fill the bowl. There, while the water gently bubbles and you fill your lungs with smoke, you may read the native newspapers or play a game of tric-trac or eat a dish of *molloha*, putrid fish steeped in brine beloved of the effendi, or have your shoes polished, or chaffer with the hawkers of a hundred and one things, from live quails to trouser buttons, who swarm about the tables set out upon the pavement.

Though it is in the heart of Cairo's European quarter, the Café Sheesha is mainly frequented by the native and his parasites, Greek, Syrian, Armenian, and Hebrew, who carry on for the Egyptian the business life of Egypt. The *jeunesse dorée* of the capital, with their English clothes and French women and Italian racing-cars, know the Café Sheesha not. Grave *ulama*, that is, scribes from the mosques, pot-bellied effendis in the Government service, well-to-do *omdehs* (mayors) from the country, fat Syrian merchants, skinny Armenian money-lenders, foregather here and watch the picturesque procession of the Cairo traffic go roaring by.

His errand at the Hotel Continental accomplished, to the Café Sheesha Todros Effendi bent his steps. To his great content, his friend, Mr. Voronian, was already there. He sat just inside the open door, biting his nails and reading *Al Ahram.*

As Todros, one fat brown hand pressed to his heart, greeted him by name, the Armenian raised his eyes from under his tufted brows and laid down his newspaper.

'Thy day be happy and blessed, Todros Effendi!' he returned in Arabic the other's salutation and clapped his hands for the waiter. 'How lightly rest the cares of State upon you, most worthy friend! With what will you refresh yourself after the heat of the morning? A cup of coffee, a glass of mastic?'

'Coffee, Abdul!' Todros told the white-robed waiter and dropped into a chair opposite the Armenian in his high astrakhan hat and rusty black clothes. 'I hope your health is good, much esteemed *kharwaga?*'

'As well as possible, I thank God,' rejoined the other piously. 'I feared that you were ill, as I have not had the pleasure of seeing you for some days.'

His bony figure stooping over the table he blinked his heavily lidded eyes at the Copt. His guinea-yellow face was flaccid, with skin that hung in folds, and, with his curved nose and long and scraggy neck, he suggested one of those melancholy and moulting vultures one sees in captivity.

Todros Effendi sighed. 'We Government officials lead the life of a dog,' he lamented importantly. 'More and more my chiefs leave everything to me. I work day and night. Scarcely a minute have I for myself. Nothing is done without me. I am indispensable to the

Minister. It is, evidently, a position of enormous responsibility. Confidential information is thrust upon me such as I would not dare communicate even to my own father.' He sighed again, and with a loud sucking noise, to show, after the Oriental fashion, his appreciation of the other's hospitality, drained his coffee-cup.

Voronian touched his cap with a hand like a talon. 'May it agree with thee, sir!' he said ceremoniously.

The Copt replaced his cup and drew up his chair.

'We had a visitor this morning,' he remarked confidentially and peered into the Armenian's face. Voronian glanced about him cautiously. The only person in their neighbourhood was a tall Sheikh, a dervish of the Rifai sect, as the blue centre of his turban announced, a splendid-looking copper-coloured man in a silk *kaftan* who sat at a table meditating over a *sheesha*.

'Speak in English!' commanded the Armenian in a low voice. Then, 'Who was it?'

'The man from the *Gebel* again.'

Mr. Voronian frowned. 'But he went to England, did you not tell me? Beware of deceiving me, Todros Effendi!'

'He arraive by the ship last night and come straight to the Ministry this morning. The Chief greet him like his brother. They made much talk together.'

'So, so?' The Armenian's yellow fingers plucked nervously at the greyish stubble on his chin. 'Of what did they speak?'

For a fraction of a second the Copt baulked. Mr. Voronian was watching his face. Then Todros said glibly:

'He complain that his excavation is plundered. The

skill of the thiefs, he say, is extraordinary. He ask that they shall send soldiers and police to guard where he dig in the ground. He was angry. He beat the table several times in his passion . . .'

He broke off and stole a glance at the other's face. But the Armenian shot out a skinny hand and laid it on the clerk's sleeve.

'No, no my friend. Reflect a little! Are you sure of what you tell?'

It was as though a shadow fell athwart the smooth brown face of Todros Effendi. His eyes shifted uneasily. 'He spoke as I have tell,' he affirmed sullenly.

Voronian's lean forefinger tapped the marble table. 'The visitor came, yes,' he said. 'But you heard nothing, my friend, is it not so?'

Todros Effendi writhed in his chair. 'In effect it was not easy . . . the door was closed,' he muttered unwillingly.

'You heard nothing?'

'At any rate,' affirmed the Copt stoutly, evading the question, 'when their speech was done, my Chief send for me in haste and order me to take at once an important document to the man from the *Gebel* at the Locanda Continental.'

'What was this document?'

'Report on ravages of boll-weevil in Lower Delta!' readily answered the clerk.

The Armenian made a note on his cuff. 'And that is all you know?' he asked, staring fixedly at the Copt.

'For the moment, yes. But soon I shall have good informations for you, my dear Meestair Voronian. You shall see this soon, very soon.'

Covetously his little eyes searched that grim and

yellow face. Voronian's hand flicked and a blue banknote lay under the coffee-cup.

'Have a care,' he hissed, leaning forward and speaking in the clerk's ear. 'Tell me not the things you think I would like to hear. It is the truth I want, mark well my words, Todros Effendi! It is only the truth for which I pay!'

He laid a hand on his cap and shuffled out of the café.

In the blazing sunshine Mr. Voronian crossed the Opera Square, and, passing by the public letter-writers squatting by their desks along the railings of the Post-Office, plunged into the seething maelstrom of Cairo's famous market street, the Mouski. Here he boarded a dirty and ramshackle native motor-bus packed with a swaying mass of malodorous humanity. With an ear-piercing horn that never ceased to sound, it banged and rattled its precarious way through the dense traffic that poured in two directions along the narrow, noisy street, motor-cars incessantly tooting, horse-cabs, their drivers screaming out abuse and imprecations upon the foot-passengers swarming out into the roadway, heavily burdened camels with their strange sauntering lope, tiny donkeys almost disappearing under their enormous loads, sherbet-sellers clashing their metal cups together, street vendors bawling their wares, a clamorous, jostling, sweating multitude dotted red with tarbushes like poppies in a field of corn. Through the mob, seemingly unconscious of the din, a tall, copper-coloured Rifai dervish in a silken *kaftan* went striding, looking neither to right nor left save when he cast a nonchalant glance at the native omnibus which, with Mr. Voronian standing on the rear platform, bumped so slowly through the

press that the man on foot could easily keep pace with it.

At the little mosque of El Ashraf, Mr. Voronian scrambled off the bus and struck into the narrow and dusty street that runs to the left. On his right, presently, the dark cool entrance of the covered bazaars, with their mysterious perfumes of spices and attar of roses, seemed to beckon him in out of the heat and noise of the city. But the Armenian passed the bazaars by, and a little later, through an ancient gateway that sprouted grass, dived down a tiny lane.

In a moment the raucous clamour of the street was left behind. It was the siesta hour in the Arab quarter. But for the rare patter of naked feet or the piteous braying of an ass, not a sound broke the stagnant hush. The warm air was heavy with greasy smells, the emanations of hot fat and garlic, blended with it that pungent, rancid odour of the Oriental that rises in men's nostrils when memory carries them back to the East.

The sun beat down fiercely out of a cloudless sky and the white dust was thick on the broken roadway. Voronian, walking with the gait of one who knew the intricate geography of the quarter, sought the blue-black shade cast by the blank mud walls with their projecting windows screened with carved wood, checking sometimes to step carefully over the prone form of a sleeper, head muffled up against the flies, lying like a dead man, in the runnel.

At length he halted before an old wooden door, heavily studded with nails, that broke the monotony of a high mud wall. He raised the stout iron knocker and struck a blow that reverberated down the lane. There followed the soft thudding of bare feet and then in the

door a little trap was shot back. Instantly thereon, with the creak of wooden bars, the door swung outwards. Nimbly the Armenian stepped across the threshold and the door fell to. At that moment, round the corner of the house, at the end of the high mud wall a copper-coloured face was visible under a blue-topped turban.

Almost at once it was withdrawn and presently down the lane a tall Rifai dervish came walking, his string of beads in one hand, his slippers in the other. He went, as he had breasted his way through the crowded Mouski, sedately, the very picture of a Moslem of the better class engaged in thought.

He passed the door that had closed behind the Armenian and followed the wall along until it turned, forming the angle of a little open space with a fountain in the centre. Here the dervish's pace slackened and, looking back, he surveyed the way by which he had come. The lane was empty.

The fountain was raised from the ground on a couple of shallow stone steps. On one of these the Rifai seated himself, his back to the coping, his face towards the lane. From his neck he took the white scarf which, like many of his class, he wore, the ends loosely hanging down, and, with a knife which he produced from the folds of his *kaftan*, deftly bored two slits in the muffler. Then, with his slippers for a pillow, he stretched himself at full length upon the lower step of the fountain, opened out the scarf to cover face and head, the slits adjusted to the eyes, and composed himself as though for sleep. From the minaret of the little mosque that, rising beyond the flat house-tops, stabbed the blue sky behind the sleeper, the high-pitched voice of the muezzin called to afternoon prayer. '*Allahu akbar!*' it

quavered nasally. '*Allahu akbar! Allahu akbar!*' Presently the summons died away and the hot afternoon hush descended once more upon the little lane.

An hour later, the bolts of the door in the wall grated. Creaking on its hinges it swung wide. Mr. Voronian emerged and was off down the lane at a brisk shuffle. A black-clad woman, veiled to the eyes, a tiny brown babe straddling her left shoulder, appeared on the far side of the open space with a pitcher on her head. She crossed to the fountain and filled the vessel at the iron tap. Her movements appeared to disturb the sleeping dervish, for he stirred uneasily, then, plucking the scarf from his face, sat up. He struggled to his feet, brushed the dust from his flowing robe, and moistened his hands and lips with water. Then, with his customary dignity, he left the fountain and sauntered down the lane to the nail-studded door.

At his knock a face appeared behind the bars of the peep-hole.

'Peace be with you!' said the dervish, touching his turban.

'And with you be peace and God's mercy and blessings, O Sheikh!' replied the keeper of the door.

'Is thy master, Ali Shamy, within?' asked the Rifai.

The door swung outward and the janitor appeared.

'You are mistaken, O Sheikh! There is none of that name that dwells within this house!'

'Is it not, then, the abode of Ali Shamy, the merchant of the Bazaar of the Leather-Workers?'

'*La, la!*' The porter wagged his head in negation. 'This is the dwelling of Osman el Maghraby. Truly I know not this Ali Shamy of whom you speak.'

'Is this, then, not the Darb Choglan?'

'A street thus named I know not, Sheikh. This is the lane of Daoud.'

'They have set my feet on the wrong road!' exclaimed the Rifai angrily. He turned to the lane again.

'Peace be with thee, Sheikh!' said the janitor, preparing to close the door.

'May God protect thee, friend!' replied the Rifai, and the door fell to with a thud. With measured steps the dervish passed down the lane.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH JEAN AVERIL HEARS A STORY

A WEEK after her arrival in Cairo, Jean Averil lunched with the Henry Richboroughs at the Semiramis Hotel. January was over and the brief season was at its height, its brilliance as yet undimmed and only to wane when, towards the end of February, marshalled hordes of hasty tourists, like a beneficent plague of Egypt, would descend upon the land.

Jean had not been an hour at Shepheard's before she fell in with friends from New York. Forthwith she was drawn into the social stream. After her three years of married tranquillity and her fourteen months of widowhood, it came upon her almost as a revelation to find that she was courted and desired and made much of even as she had been in her deb. days in America or during that far-off London season when she had met Mark Averil. Her days were filled with sight-seeing, excursions to the desert, rambles in the shady coolth of the bazaars, interspersed with luncheon and dinner parties.

Almost every night there were dances at which her engagements with the eager queues of jolly, sunburnt subalterns of the Cairo garrison involved mathematical calculations, where the most petted of Hussars or Lancers would gratefully snatch at a 'missing six' from the gravely pretty American with the charming frocks. They all wanted to take her riding or to watch the polo: but she refused. She never wanted, she told herself, to see a saddle-horse or a polo pony again . . .

Said Hussein had been indefatigably attentive. The morning after her arrival he had called for her, looking strangely exotic with a tarbush perched on his tawny head, in the largest and most eccentric-looking racing-car she had ever seen and had whirled her out to the Pyramids with luncheon at the Mena House to follow. He had offered her riding-horses, the loan of one of his cars, his box at the Opera. Then business had taken him away from Cairo for four or five days, but before going away he had entreated her not to leave for Luxor without letting him see her again. She had not promised to defer her departure; but in the upshot she had prolonged her stay, unable to tear herself away from the hectic life of this strangest of the world's capitals.

The street scenes entranced her. She would have been content to sit all day upon the terrace at Shepheard's and gaze down upon that moving pageant of the street below, where, mingled with the hasting civilisation of the West, the unchanging life of the East pursues its unhurried way. The welcome sunshine of the daylight hours, the magic evenings when the sinking sun crimsoned the Nile and every palm and every camel on the bank stood out hard and sharp in the opalescent light, the stupendous nights under the glittering stars, were as an anodyne to the heart that, when she came to Egypt, was heavier than she herself would have confessed.

She lunched with the Richboroughs at a table set in one of the great open bays of the Semiramis restaurant, shaded by brown-and-white awnings and looking out over banks of flowers upon the turgid yellow stream of the Nile. It was a large party, 'featuring,' as they say in the movies, Mrs. Richborough's latest social acquisitions. These were, in order of precedence, a Spanish

Duchess, whose complexion was the exact shade of the outer skin of one of her native onions, and an emaciated English countess who looked as though she had been hunger-striking. Several of their fellow travellers from the Aquatic were among the guests, and, as they sat down, Jean caught sight of the saffron-hued countenance of Mr. Simonou as he threaded his way across the crowded restaurant, rather late, to join them.

She found herself placed next to a grey-haired Englishman with a tired look whose name she did not catch. By the fact that he ordered the ice-water she asked for in Arabic, she judged him to be a resident and she braced herself for the question which, her brief experience told her, would inevitably be forthcoming. But she was disappointed.

'I'm not going to ask you how you like Egypt,' he said, 'because I'm well aware that you have discussed that question *au fond* with every one of my fellow countrymen out here who has been fortunate enough to meet you.'

She laughed. 'It's perfectly true,' she admitted, with a vivid memory of the conversational opening of the majority of her dance partners, 'but I'm going to tell you all the same. I just love every minute of it. And I think the sunshine is simply adorable!'

Her neighbour looked out across the river gleaming in the midday glare. 'Ah, the sun,' he murmured. 'The only punctual person in Egypt . . . and the only faithful friend!'

'Why,' Jean cried, 'isn't that too terrible? You must be a cynic!'

'I'm not,' returned her companion, 'but my friend Cradock, who originated that remark, is . . .'

'Cradock, did you say?'

'Yes, David Cradock, the excavator. Do you know him? You came out in the Aquatic, I think Mrs. Richborough told me, didn't you? Well, he was on your boat . . .'

'I met him,' Jean remarked abstractedly. 'Rather . . . rather a curious person, isn't he?'

The Englishman laughed. 'Well,' he observed, crumbling his bread, 'Cradock's not exactly what you'd call a lady's man. But that's his misfortune. Apart from that, when you find the natives taking to a fellow as they take to him — and they can't fool Cradock, mind you, for he knows the Egyptian inside out, mind, customs, language, the whole bag of tricks — you can be pretty sure that he's all right. Nothing like a native for spotting a gentleman! And Cradock, for all his odd ways, is a white man.'

Jean was silent for a moment. 'That's not quite the report I had of him,' she said presently. 'Wasn't he mixed up in some rather unpleasant scandal . . . something about a woman?'

Her neighbour looked up quickly. 'Now I wonder who's been talking to you?' he asked. 'Would it be indiscreet to enquire just what it is you heard about Cradock?'

She shrugged her shoulders. 'Oh, that he was a bad lot, that he'd been dismissed from your Government service over some fuss about a woman . . .'

The Englishman's face hardened. He hesitated, looking at his neighbour doubtfully.

'Perhaps I shouldn't have said that,' she added quickly. 'Maybe he's a friend of yours?'

Her neighbour nodded. 'He's been my friend for years.'

'Oh,' Jean cried, 'I'm sorry . . .'

'It's all right,' returned the Englishman. 'How should you know? But, if you like, I'll tell you the true story of David Cradock. There aren't many people left in Egypt who know it, although there seem to be some,' he added rather bitterly, 'who are still ready to kick a man when he's down.

'Twelve years ago Cradock was one of the secretaries at the British Agency, as the Residency used to be called. He was only a young fellow — twenty-three, to be exact; and it was his first experience of the East. A certain very beautiful lady came out here for the winter and young Cradock fell in love with her. She was a most attractive creature, I admit, but she was a year or two older than David and a *divorcée* into the bargain.

'They went about everywhere together. I did my best to make the boy see reason; but he was a headstrong young devil. He was going to marry the woman, he said, for he was quite certain that he would never care for anybody the way he cared for her and' — the Englishman's eyes softened — 'and I'm bound to say that, although I didn't believe him at the time, it seems to me now that he spoke the truth.

'And then came the crash. A certain bit of information leaked out of the Agency and was used on the cotton market to influence quotations. Kitchener was at the Agency in those days, and my hat! he was in a passion. Enquiries were made discreetly and eventually the information in question was traced back through a Syrian broker to a certain wealthy Egyptian and from him to Cradock's little lady. The news in question was highly confidential and, as luck would have it, Cradock had deciphered the despatch containing it.

'"K." carpeted the boy. Can you picture the scene? "K.," with a face of death, his heavy cheeks trembling with anger, and Cradock blurting out the pitiful story. It appears that the young idiot had actually asked this woman to marry him and they were secretly "engaged." She had wanted to know all about his work — sharing his life, Cradock called it; and at one of their almost daily meetings, he had let slip this one little bit of vital information.

'Can you imagine the effect of this wretched tale on "K." who, as you probably know, had little use for women anyway? It speaks for the boy's honesty that he should have dared to own up at all. "Are you aware, Mr. Cradock," the great man asked him in that awful voice of his that used to make us all shake in our shoes, "are you aware that this woman is a common adventuress and that she is being financed by the Egyptian to whom she passed on the confidential information that you gave away?" At that Cradock, who has the courage of a lion when he's roused, flared up. "That's not true, sir!" he told him; I had the whole scene from Cradock after the interview. "Read the police report," "K." ordered his private secretary.

'It was plain as a pikestaff then and the boy, who, up to that point, had held his head high, broke down utterly. "K." sent him home and, mercifully, the F.O. allowed him to resign. And that's the story of David Cradock. Foolish, idiotic, thoughtless — anything you like on those lines. But dishonourable? Never. If you'd seen him when he came to my room after "K." had finished with him. The pity of it, the infinite pity! I've often thanked my stars that none of my youthful scrapes was paid back to me as that one act of folly was

visited upon David Cradock. Even now, sometimes, when he comes to see me, saddened and bitter and lonely, I catch myself thinking, "There, but for the grace of God, goes John Bastable!"'

He turned and looked at the woman by his side. Her eyes were glittering suspiciously, her face was flushed, and her lips were trembling. 'How sad!' she murmured. 'How pitifully sad!' The colour deepened in her face. 'Now I can understand why he is so bitter,' she added, and sighed. 'But I think Lord Kitchener was terribly hard on him,' she went on.

Bastable shook his head. 'He was dead right. British rule depends on the maintenance of British prestige. We could never afford to have it said in this land of baksheesh that British officials were using confidential information for purposes of speculation.'

'But Mr. Cradock didn't!'

'I know; but that's what the Egyptians would have said. Cradock failed; and "K." broke him. If I'd been in "K.'s" place and Cradock my friend, I'd have acted in exactly the same way.'

'But he was shamefully betrayed,' Jean expostulated indignantly.

'He was,' Bastable agreed. 'But that was Cradock's lookout. "K." could take no cognizance of that. "K." was a hard man: but he was always just. Cradock was the first to admit it.'

Jean laughed rather hardly. 'How just you men always are towards each other,' she remarked, 'and how unjust towards women!'

'Why,' cried Bastable chaffingly, 'who's the cynic now?'

'Jean Averil' — Mrs. Richborough's high voice broke

in upon them from the head of the table — 'you're coming to the Prince's dinner to-night, aren't you?'

'Why, of course,' she replied. 'The Prince 'phoned me this morning and I told him I'd love to. He's sending the Rolls to call for me at a quarter to nine.'

'It's fetching us first,' her hostess explained. 'Quite an intimate party, it's to be, the Prince says — only you and ourselves and one or two others, I believe. I'm just thrilled at the notion of dining in an Arab palace.'

'Who's the Prince?' Bastable asked Jean.

'Prince Said Hussein, a most delightful man. We met him on the ship. Do you know him?'

Bastable looked at her rather strangely. 'Oh, yes,' he replied, 'I know him all right!'

'But why that tone?'

'Well,' he said slowly, 'it rather amuses some of us who have spent the best part of our lives in the East to see what social success certain Egyptians achieve outside their own country. We call your friend plain Said Hussein out here: he doesn't get a handle to his name in Egypt; not from the Government, at any rate.'

'But isn't he a Prince?'

'His grandfather was an illiterate peasant, a *fellah*, who made a fortune out of land speculation and fled to Europe before the Khedive Ismail, who was rather an acquisitive person, could collar it. He settled down in Paris where his son, Said Hussein's father, married a Georgian, the daughter of a chief. She was a princess at home, and so her son, Said Hussein, who was born in Paris, calls himself Prince.'

'Well,' Jean retorted, bridling up at the other's somewhat cutting tone, 'he's a very charming and cul-

tured man whether your old Government say he's a Prince or not.'

'Quite so,' Bastable commented coldly.

'All you Britishers seem to have a down on the poor man,' Jean protested. 'When I told Lord Bearcombe, a very nice Hussar major I know, that I'd been out motoring with the Prince, he was just as mysterious as you are about him. I know that Said Hussein doesn't like the British. But that's because he's patriotic and wants to see Egypt free.'

The party was breaking up. 'Well,' said Bastable, 'if you'll always remember that he's an Oriental, you'll be all right.' Smiling, he put out his hand. 'I must run away now,' he told her, 'I've got an appointment at three.'

She held his hand in hers for a moment. 'Thank you for telling me the story of David Cradock,' she said and looked at him rather wistfully. 'It taught me a lesson. I'll never listen to gossip again.'

She remained pensive after he had gone. Her thoughts carried her back to a face that had whitened beneath its brown, to eyes that had winced as though in pain. Again she felt her cheeks redden.

Suddenly her hostess descended upon her as she stood in the sunlit hall and brought her back to earth. 'Now, my dear,' that lady announced briskly, 'our dragoman is going to take us to a most interesting convent to see dervishes whirl. I've got the car outside and you and the Duchess and dear Lady Rockhampton must come, too, and, oh, Mr. Simonou' — she caught the Greek by the sleeve as he passed, hat in hand — 'wouldn't you like to come and see dervishes whirl?'

'Dear lady,' replied the Greek, flashing his fine white

teeth at her, 'I am the most miserable of men at having to disobey one of your commands. But I have a business engagement and a car awaits me at the door!'

Jean accepted the invitation. She was free and she didn't particularly want to be alone with her thoughts that afternoon.

'Be a darling,' said Mrs. Richborough to Jean, 'and see if the dragoman is outside while I collect the party. A fat man in a fez and a magenta bath-gown. Make him find the car . . .'

She fussed away. Jean passed through the swing-door. At the kerb, at the foot of the steps, stood an enormous racing-car. She recognized it at once as Said Hussein's; and, in further identification, at the wheel sat the swarthy native chauffeur who had driven them out to the Pyramids. A man was just getting into the tonneau. It was Simonou, that 'devastating bounder' whom Said Hussein had refused to meet.

The Greek, Jean told herself with a smile, was certainly a hustler. In the space of a week not only had he made the acquaintance of the Prince, but he had also got to know him well enough to use one of his cars. This was swift climbing with a vengeance . . .

CHAPTER XI

THE SONG OF BAMBA

'WELCOME to my poor house!'

Prince Said Hussein, in a dinner-coat and white waistcoat, his tarbush on his well-shaped head, stood in the entrance of his palace to greet his guests as they descended from the Rolls-Royce he had sent to fetch them. The great bronze gates were folded back from the low clover-shaped doorway and on either side the long marble hall was lined with scarlet-clad Nubian servingmen bearing lights.

They wore the ancient dress of the Mamelukes, short scarlet jackets, immensely baggy scarlet trousers, and scarlet slippers. Their huge turbans were snowy white and at the back of each hung the short traditional pigtail. Magnificent men all, not one of them under six feet, they stood like statues, six on a side, a flaming band of red, their polished jet-black faces gleaming like patent leather where the light fell upon them from the little lamps they held in one swarthy hand.

At the end of the hall silken hangings were looped up to reveal another clover-shaped doorway whose upper part framed a patch of blue-black sky spangled with blazing stars. The opening afforded a glimpse of marble, whitely visible in the night, of palms that drooped against the sky, of water that rose and fell, plashing in a basin. The air was faintly fragrant with incense; and somewhere out of sight a little snatch of melody, evasive, oft-repeated, Oriental, was being thrummed on some native instrument.

Jean Averil gasped with delight; and, gasping, gazed about her in wonderment. Behind her was the splendid limousine, its olive-green coachwork shining in the starlight, the symbol, the high-water mark, of Western civilisation; before her lay the East, magic, mysterious. The silent retainers, in their crimson liveries, the dim light, the glimpse of that vast open court beyond, entranced her.

A stalwart black body-servant in red and gold, with a curved ivory-handled sword trailing from his waist, stood beside the Prince. Said Hussein spoke a word and two white-robed attendants appeared and took the ladies' wraps and Mr. Richborough's hat and coat. The Prince turned to his guests. 'Will you come with me?' he invited them. As they moved forward towards the starry court, they heard the great bronze gates behind them clang to.

At the entrance to the court the Prince clapped his hands. On that instant the distant music was stilled and the wide *patio* was suddenly flooded with soft light. It was surrounded on four sides by galleries supported on slender white marble columns and lit by concealed lamps. In the centre was a high marble fountain from which the water gushed up in a high glistening pillar through which green light played so that the fountain seemed to spout an emerald stream. About the pillars of the arcades gorgeous flowering shrubs clambered, the deep purple Bougainvillæa, the bright red Bignonia, and between them and the central fountain, overshadowing marble seats, were clumps of high *dôm* palms.

'One of the pashas under Ismail built himself this house,' the Prince explained. 'Like all Orientals he adored the shade of trees and running water. This

courtyard was part of the women's quarters in his day. He is said to have punished one of the eunuchs by holding him upside down in that fountain until he drowned. That wooden screenwork you see on the far side conceals the entrance to the harem. We're dining there . . .'

'Pardon me, Prince,' said Mr. Richborough — he was a tall, lantern-jawed, dyspeptic-looking individual who spoke rarely in the presence of his wife — 'I fear we are intruding.'

'Intruding? But not in the least. What do you mean?'

'Well,' remarked the banker who seemed to be slightly embarrassed, 'I have always understood that, in the East, the hay-reem was considered essentially a private part of a man's house. I hope, therefore, that we're not trespassing on your hospitality . . .'

The Prince shouted with laughter.

'My dear Mr. Richborough,' he protested, 'I am not married. I assure you there's not a single wife of mine in the place. This rum old shack is eminently a bachelor establishment, I give you my word.'

Mrs. Richborough laughed nervously. 'Mr. Richborough has a rather warped sense of humour, Prince,' she said acidly. 'You don't want to take any notice of his jokes.' But to her husband, who had crimsoned up to his horn-rimmed spectacles and was feebly stammering excuses, she whispered fiercely. 'If you can't speak without putting your foot in it, Henry, don't speak at all. The idea! Making out the man's a Bluebeard!'

'Come,' said the Prince, 'my other guests are waiting for their cocktails.'

So saying, he led the way along the marble arcades and presently branched off to the left down a corridor

hung with beautiful Persian rugs. At the end a door was ajar. They heard the sound of a piano and a woman's voice singing softly.

Said Hussein pushed open the door and the music ceased abruptly. Jean saw a square, lofty room, comfortably furnished in European style, one or two old English prints on the walls, some large leather armchairs, a bookcase full of books, a desk, and, in the corner, a baby grand — evidently the living-room of a man of artistic tastes.

As they entered, a woman rose up from behind the piano. So raven-black was her hair and so smoothly plastered down over her white forehead on either side of the narrow parting that, for the moment, one had the impression that she was wearing a black satin cap. Leaning over the piano was a wasp-waisted young man with a neat black moustache; and a dull-eyed and obese Egyptian in a tarbush reclined in one of the armchairs.

'If I may interrupt you for one instant, *chère* Nadia,' Hussein said to the woman at the piano, 'I want you to meet my friends: Mr. and Mrs. Henry Richborough, Mrs. Averil — Madame Alexandrovna, the Comte de Belfort, Osman el Maghraby. Now be friendly everybody while I mix the drinks.'

'What a perfectly wonderful place the Prince has!' Jean remarked to Madame Alexandrovna as their host retired to a sideboard.

The woman let her eyes rest for a moment on Jean's face. They were green eyes with long lashes rather too generously touched up. 'It is East and West in one,' she rejoined, striking a chord on the piano. 'The garden, it is of the Thousand and one Nights, while this room'

— she shrugged shapely naked shoulders — 'it is Peeccadilly!'

She laughed cooingly. Her little foreign accent was attractive. Her lips were full and scarlet: her colouring was warm and glowing like the tint of a tea-rose. Her ivory satin frock was exquisitely draped; but she was rather plump. An uncharitable person might have called her full-blown; for her throat was a shade too round, her bust a thought too ample, her skin of a bronze hue rather lifeless. While she chatted to Jean, her quick, alert eye was running over the American's gown of pale sea-green and silver, as though she were taking a mental note of her appearance and station in life.

'The Donatellos are late,' announced Hussein. appearing in the circle with a tray, 'but here are the drinks!'

They sipped their cocktails and conversed in desultory pre-prandial fashion until a servant came and called the Prince away. He was back in a minute ushering in a paunchy, bearded Italian and a little nimble-eyed wife.

They dined in the central apartment of the old harem, an airy room with *mashrabiyeh* windows. The wooden screenwork of the door had been folded back and they looked out upon the marble arcade, the fountain where the pasha had vented his wrath upon the luckless eunuch and the great vault of the sky over all. It was a serene night, the air balmy, the heavens flooded with light from an invisible moon not yet high enough to pale the effulgence of the stars.

While they were at table, a troupe of grave-visaged native musicians trailed onto the gallery and squatted with their instruments on the marble floor. There was

the one-string violin, the Egyptian bagpipe, and the *darabûkeh* or drum. They played Arab music that to unaccustomed ears sounds weirdly strident with its small range of notes, its themes perpetually repeated, that yet, with its haunting rhythm emphasised by the tap of the *darabûkeh*, has a fascination of its own.

Then dancers came. There was a lissom youth who pivoted barefoot on the marble flags, a stick held upright between his joined palms, the feet scarcely moving, but the whole body swaying from the hips to the beat of the drum, eyes half-veiled in sheer enjoyment of the dance, lips parted in an impish far-away smile: then a jolly coal-black Sudanese, with a lighted lamp balanced on his fuzzy poll, performed the far-famed lamp dance, rocking his body to and fro to the Prayer for the Lamp chanted full-throatedly by the musicians; and there were dancing-women, as raucous as crows, unveiled, with flying gauze draperies, eyes blackened with kohl, faces coated with paint, gold and silver bangles jingling on slim ankles, who postured and shook and swung to the brisk rattle of brass castanets.

A pause in the dancing and song; and the violin-man laid aside his instrument. The bagpipe harshly droned, then skirled a little *motif* on two or three notes and held one, sustained and plaintive, in recitative. In hoarse and guttural tones the violin-man burst forth.

He was a romantically handsome creature with a flashing black eye and features of pleasing regularity, plainly dressed in spotless white with a white turban. It was not singing; it was spoken music, a torrent of passionate, vibrating declamation that, at the end of the verse, when the bagpipe again took up its simple *motif*, left him shaken and gasping.

They had reached the end of dinner and were sitting over their champagne while the scarlet-clad servants bore round great baskets of oranges from Jaffa, grapes from The Lebanon, and green figs from Smyrna. Gradually the passion of the singer forced itself upon the attention of the diners, conversation died away, and silence fell upon them all.

'What is he saying?' whispered Jean to the Prince who sat beside her.

'It's a love lament,' he answered. 'The Song of Bamba, they call it. He is upbraiding a woman with her coldness towards him. If you watch him, you can follow it pretty well.'

Crouching in the doorway, his fine profile outlined against the light of the rising moon, the singer had turned to apostrophise the figure of his imagination. One hand rested inert upon the ground beside him; but the other, with fingers never still, now pleading, now denouncing, told the whole story of his love-sickness. His eyes blazed, his whole frame trembled, his voice shook with the fire of his passion. In a deep and thrilling undertone the Prince began to translate for Jean . . .

'O thou of the black eyes, listen to my sorrow. Night and day I yearn for thee. The ox at the plough, the camel at the water-wheel, is not more sorry than I. I looked for thee at the water-hole, but thou passedst me by. I sought for thy face at the window, but thou didst not look out.'

The plaint died away and the bagpipe piped its little measure. Jean felt a warm hand on her bare arm. The Prince's eyes, redly glowing, were fixed upon her face.

'Translate some more!' she begged him.

'While I toil in the fields, O Bamba of the black eyes, I mourn

for thee. At midday I cannot eat. At night I lie awake weeping for love of thee. O light of my eyes, give me a sign. Give me a sign of love!'

The choking voice died away. Jean felt strongly stirred. The eerie notes of the pipe rang out through the silent starlit garden with its flowers that perfumed the warm night. Her gaze rivetted on the singer's dark and passionate face, she was oblivious of her surroundings, oblivious of the increasing pressure of that warm hand creeping up her arm, oblivious of the light that leaped so strangely in the depths of the Prince's red amber eyes.

'Spurn me not, O Bamba, for I am a man terrible in wrath. Let me no more be a stranger to thee, O eyes of mine. I said to my mother: "Marry me to Bamba or I die!" But if I die, O Bamba of the black eyes, first shalt thou know my sword!'

The voice rose shrilly to the menace with hand uplifted, then broke off on a gesture of utter *abandon*. The bagpipe was stilled. A little murmur rose round the table.

'Perfectly marvellous!' cried Mrs. Richborough, clapping her plump, beringed hands. 'Bravo, bravo!'

'*Il est très fort, évidemment!*' said de Belfort, whose eyes were fixed on Madame Alexandrovna. The latter stirred uneasily in her chair.

'It is only the Orient that understands the art of love,' she murmured. Her emerald eyes seemed to devour the proud profile of the violin-man who had remained squatting immobile in the doorway.

'That was extraordinary!' sighed Jean and turned to Said Hussein. The Prince was pale, he was breathing heavily and there was a strained look on his face. He

took his hand from her arm and gave rather a forced laugh.

'He does it well,' he said condescendingly. From his pocket he took a wad of bank-notes, stripped off one and pitched it to the singer. Then he barked out a word in Arabic and the musicians and the singers and the dancers padded away.

The Prince pushed back his chair. 'The air is mild,' said he rather hoarsely. 'Let us take our coffee outside under the palms.'

They all strolled forth into the garden, silently as if the magic of the night had laid a spell on them. Jean was glad to get out into the open air. With the ending of the song, she had felt suddenly oppressed by the atmosphere of the dim, quiet room where they had dined. It was as though the walls of the old seraglio gave off memories like a cloying perfume, memories of love that had been and was no more.

The music had made her oddly restless. Her nerves yet vibrated to the throbbing of the drum. The anguished pleading in the singer's voice had moved her deeply. Strangely, irrelevantly, those proud features troubled by passion, in clear-cut silhouette against the moon, had brought back to her mind another face clouded with pain, with deep blue eyes that gazed at her reproachfully. She was conscious of a feeling of great loneliness, of utter abandonment.

How quietly warm it was in the garden! Breathless under the golden moon it seemed to await her coming. The night was alive with little sounds, the strident whirr of the cicadas, the monotonous bass of the bullfrogs in the distance. An immense lassitude came over her, and when, as they went along, Said Hussein slipped his arm into hers, she was glad of the support.

She uplifted her face towards the stars and sighed. 'What a wonderful actor that man was!' she said.

'If he was acting!' the Prince replied. 'If one could look into his heart, I dare say one would find that he himself is tortured by that most sublime of all agonies, unrequited love. Have you ever been in love, Mrs. Averil?'

'I was married for three years,' she told him. 'I must have been, I suppose.'

'How calmly you say that!' he cried. 'Oh, you women of the West, destined to go through life without ever tasting the divine ecstasy, the bitter, bitter agony of love! Do you know that in the East men *die* of the love that awakes no response? Their love burns them up as a lamp consumes its oil and they die because they have no longer the will to live. Have you ever experienced a love like that?'

His voice shook; and she felt his hand tremble on her arm.

'I've known the pain of love,' she told him. 'Love brought suffering to me!'

'I know,' he answered. 'I read it in your eyes the first night I met you. And I was filled with anger against the blind fool who had his chance with you and failed . . .'

'My husband is dead,' she reminded him; but he swept her gentle protest aside.

'A man could bring love in place of loneliness into those eyes of yours,' he exclaimed.

She shrugged her shoulders. 'I have forgotten what love is,' she replied.

They had reached a little nook hidden among the palms whose tufted fronds stirred idly against the great yellow moon. He stopped and faced her, taking her

hands in his. His hands were burning, and they tingled as with an electric fluid.

'Let me teach you . . .' he faltered with eyes aflame.

With quiet dignity she drew her hands away. 'Not again!' she said. 'Not you. Nor any other man.' Her voice was cold, her manner ice. She looked about her. 'Where are the others?' she asked composedly. 'Let's go back to them, shall we?'

'One instant!' he pleaded. 'I brought you here to offer you a little souvenir of the first night that you honoured my house with your presence.' He drew a little gold box from his pocket. 'Please don't refuse it,' he entreated. 'I shall be so unhappy if you do.'

The box was of heavy gold, exquisitely chased in an arabesque design, with a turquoise clasp. The Prince thrust it into Jean's unwilling hands. 'Open it!' he bade her.

She raised the lid and found a great emerald within, nestling on a lining of cloth of gold. It was a cut stone of the finest water, blazing with a green fire.

'Oh, Prince, I couldn't!' Jean exclaimed, the colour coming into her cheeks. 'Why, a stone like that is worth thousands of dollars! Believe me, I appreciate your thought very much, but . . .' She closed the box and handed it back.

His face fell as he took back the gift, and it was as though a veil were drawn over the reddish light in his strange eyes.

'At least you are not angry?'

'Of course not,' she told him. 'Now we really must join the rest or I shan't have a shred of reputation left!'

Their absence had scarcely been remarked; for at the fountain Said Hussein's other guests were gathered about

an Indian conjuror who squatted on the ground, his paraphernalia set out on a cloth before him. They were entranced with his skill. He juggled with corks under metal cups, he produced a live chicken from Osman el Maghraby's tarbush and, having made it disappear, bade Mr. Richborough look in his waistcoat, and lo! the fluffy little creature was there nestling against his shirt-front; he gave Jean a ten-piastre piece to hold in her closed hand, and, though she felt the metal edge against her palm, when she opened her hand the silver coin had vanished and an English penny lay in its place.

'It's real Egyptian magic!' exclaimed Mrs. Richborough when at length the conjuror, profoundly salaaming, had packed up his traps and departed.

'Pooh,' remarked de Belfort, 'travellers' tales! There's no such thing. Five years I have lived in Cairo and I have not even come across a passable fortune-teller! There are *vieux farceurs* who profess to read your future in sand, in coffee dregs, *que sais-je? Mais, c'est de la blague!*'

The Prince spoke in Jean's ear. 'Would you like to have your fortune told?' he whispered.

'I should love it,' she rejoined.

'You aren't afraid of the future?'

She hesitated, looking at him. 'You don't mean to say it's serious?'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'It's a young man called the Sheikh Abdullah who enjoys an extraordinary reputation among the natives. He lives far away in the country and people travel great distances to consult him. Sometimes he comes to Cairo. Next time he is down here, I could get him for you if you like.'

'Oh, how fascinating!' cried Jean. 'But,' she said doubtfully, 'I'm going to Luxor to-morrow evening . . .'

'The Sheikh Abdullah is not in Cairo now,' said the Prince, 'and I couldn't get him in the time. But I've promised Madame Alexandrovna that he shall tell her fortune as well. As soon as I know that he's in Cairo, I'll arrange with him and send you a wire. Then if you want to come up for it, you can.'

'I certainly will,' Jean promised. 'And is he really good, your Sheikh man?'

'Extraordinary, they say. But keep this to yourself. I can't ask the others. These people will never perform for a crowd.'

'I shan't say a word,' Jean declared. 'Tell me, Prince, have you tried him yourself?'

The Prince laughed and shook his head. 'I know my fate,' he replied. 'Many years ago my old Sudanese nurse told my fortune in sand. Everything she predicted has come true so far — except the end. I shall never know white hairs, she told me, and I shall meet my death through a woman in the Sign of the Ram.'

He spoke carelessly; but there was a far-away look in his shifting yellow eyes.

CHAPTER XII

LUXOR

When Jean Averil told Prince Said Hussein that she was leaving for Luxor on the following day, her mind was not fully made up. As often happens, however, the announcement of her intention clinched her resolution. She had not by any means exhausted the attractions of Cairo; and, had she been asked why she was going away, she would probably have protested that she was worn out with dancing, that Cairo was too noisy, that the streets were too dusty. She would, in fact, have alleged any reason but the true one. What that reason was she asked herself uncertainly as, after a night in the train *de luxe*, she watched the brown and green panorama of the sunlit countryside slip past the windows of the sleeping-car.

She told herself that she was restless; that she wanted to get away somewhere by herself and think. Life in Cairo had been an endless merry-go-round, a kaleidoscope of the same places and the same people, acquaintances all, with never a friend to confide in. She was weary of *cosmopolis*, weary of these well-bred Englishmen, all stamped out of the same mould like pennies issued from the mint, weary of these sleek Continentals, to whom every woman is a fresh adventure, with their hand-kissing and their bows and their obvious, empty compliments.

She was vexed with herself; for she had lost her peace of mind. After the great disaster she had resolutely

sought within herself that tranquillity which, she thought at one time, her husband's treachery had banished for ever. Her mother, with whom she had gone to live, was an invalid; and few callers came to the old-fashioned Boston mansion; for Jean's unmarried sister, who kept house, was an artist and absorbed in her work. In that placid home, in the days of her early widowhood, Jean had grimly fought to a finish her fight against despair; and when she emerged from her retirement to face once more her circle of friends in New York, it was with the feeling that she was no longer of this world of eager men and women with their loves and hates, their quarrels and reconciliations, their jealousies, their ambitions, their strivings.

But something had happened to her now. Something unsettling, mysterious, like this ancient land with its air of brooding expectation. Her heart was dead to love — she had told herself this so often that she believed it; but it was not dead to pity, and she was conscious of a feeling of overwhelming compassion for someone who — how long ago it seemed! — had wilted beneath her insult. Since her talk with Bastable, Cradock and his story kept recurring to her mind. It was absurd to think about him, she repeated to herself, a man she had spoken to only a couple of times; but, as he lived at Luxor, or rather in the hills beyond, she sometimes wondered whether she would meet him again.

A grave voice broke in upon her meditation.

'We're there, Madam!'

Simmons stood in the compartment door, wearing the regard of uncompromising disapproval which had rested upon her features since their arrival in Egypt. The heat, the dust, the smells, the mosquitoes, such 'goings-on'

as, for instance, that 'a black' should prepare her mistress's bath at the hotel, and the national avidity for baksheesh, had administered a series of shocks which, combined with a certain queasiness of the stomach not infrequent with newcomers to Egypt, had deepened the habitual gloom of her outlook.

'I have your dressing-case, Madam . . . you leave that alone, my lad!' This to the owner of a raven-black hand that appeared round the door. A smiling railway attendant showed up in the entrance to the compartment.

'This, Luxor!' he announced genially. 'All raight, leddy, you leave the luggage to me! You give me that, yes?'

Once more the indignant Simmons snatched the dressing-case away. 'I'll keep this, *if* you please,' cried the indignant Simmons, adding with a snort, 'Low, black rascal!'

A long, squat station with platforms that sparkled white with dust, masses of greenery banked behind, throngs of picturesque, patient natives huddled in the shade of the buildings amid their bundles, a strong smell of warm humanity, of gesticulating and bespectacled station-master, a deafening babble of voices, and the sun, a blinding smudge in the brilliant azure, flooding the whole landscape with crystal-clear light: on the lamps 'Luxor.'

Rather bewildered by the noise and the confusion, Jean Averil alighted on the platform, Simmons, lips firmly compressed, dressing-case tightly clasped, at her side. A scream from Simmons made Jean turn round. A very handsome young Egyptian, clad in a flowing robe of the most brilliant blue, had laid one brown

hand upon the dressing-case while with the other he sought to thrust a large nosegay of flowers upon the scared and indignant handmaiden.

'All raight,' vouchsafed the native, displaying a set of magnificent teeth in a friendly grin, 'I Moussa . . . .'

'Ugh, you bold wretch,' cried Simmons, stabbing him off with her umbrella, from which, regardless of Luxor's rainless record, she had refused to be parted. 'Take your ugly hands off me or I'll call a policeman, d'you hear?'

'All raight,' the Egyptian protested. 'I Moussa, your dragoman, leddy. You send telegraph for me from Sheppit's, yes?'

'It's all right, Simmons,' said Jean, laughing; 'it's only our dragoman!'

A jostling mob of porters, turbaned, in robes of butcher blue, surrounded the newcomers, all talking at once and gesticulating wildly.

'Excuse to me, leddy!' said Moussa, swift as thought transferring his allegiance, and held out his bunch of flowers to Jean. 'You follow me, please, I have carriage. The luggage he'll be all raight!'

So saying he appropriated Jean's parasol, her only article of hand-luggage, threw a brusque word over his shoulder to a swarthy uniformed menial from the hotel and clove a way through the press. His gait was stately, his mien superb. The day was fortunate for him. He had looked over his client and found her young, that is, not likely to be troublesome about money matters, well-dressed, signifying wealth, American, and therefore a millionairess.

The little victoria behind its two fleet Arab horses sped down the narrow street with its open shop-fronts

where artisans bent over their work-tables, Moussa radiant on the box beside the driver who, seemingly apoplectic with rage, screamed warnings on a rising note at the foot-passengers. 'To thy left, O Sheikh!'; 'Effendi, Effendi, mind thy feet!'; 'Oh, cart, to thy right!' he cried as he clanged his clarion alarm-bell.

Skirting the honey-coloured pillars of the Luxor Temple with the upstart medieval houses of the town throned above, they bowled round a corner to enter upon the riverside drive, and the majestic pageant of the Nile burst upon Jean. Across the broad and glassy river the high range of brownstone hills glowed in the pearly morning light and mirrored their rounded breasts, coral-tipped like a maiden's, in the swift but now placid stream. At the river-brink, across a thousand yards of green water, was visible, as clear as through binoculars and as stereoscopic, a tangle of diminutive figures — men and donkeys and camels — swarming like a colony of ants about the feluccas accosting the foreshore, beyond them a fringe of brilliant green and then the hills and the desert.

The excited jabbering of this rabble floated audibly over the crisp morning air. From the steamers moored below the brown parapet of the Nile promenade mounted the harsh cadence of men's voices mingled with the rasp of brushes and the clink of buckets. As her carriage whirled by, Jean saw beneath the striped awnings dusky sailors in line, one behind the other, swabbing decks in unison, as one man, to the rhythm of a sort of shouted litany.

Above the low line of riverside shops rose the pinkish bulk of the great hotel, its façade studded with balconies, a wide terrace spread out before it from which the

gorgeous Bougainvillæa hung in masses like a purple waterfall. Seated on the coping of the parapet below, a line of picturesque natives blinked their eyes and gossiped interminably in the sunshine, dragomans in gaudy dresses, hotel boatmen, barefoot, in white turbans and scarlet jerseys, tarbushed shopkeepers, ragged hawkers with their fly-whisks and necklaces or their trays of cigarettes.

It was not yet eight o'clock and everything sparkled in the morning light. The air was pleasantly fragrant with the savour of wet sand, of gardens sprayed with water. The sunshine was dazzling, the atmosphere intoxicating. The light, the spaciousness, the beauty of it all filled Jean Averil's heart with peace. The haste of modern life seemed a million miles away from the tranquil flowing river and the silent hills which had outlived the immortality of those ancient kings buried in their rocky fastnesses. Jean felt her cares dropping from her like a cloak. She sighed out her pleasure.

'I feel that I'm going to be happy here,' she said. 'Did you ever see such an exquisite place, Simmons?'

The maid, her umbrella firmly planted between her knees, sniffed audibly.

'It don't smell clean to me, Madam!' she announced doubtfully.

The days of golden sunshine that followed only confirmed Jean Averil's first impressions. Luxor brought her peace. The hotel was full of wealthy tourists of many nationalities and in the evenings the restaurant rivalled the Riviera season in its display of gorgeous gowns and jewels. But Jean eschewed the dances and the merrymaking. She was content to live a life of her

own, spending long hours on the balcony of her room overlooking the umbrageous verdure of the garden with the greyish-brown crests of the Al-Tarif hills in the distance or ensconced in a beach chair on the terrace to drink in the overwhelming majesty of the sunset.

Bearing in mind the Prince's sage advice, she would not let Moussa rush her to death. She visited tombs and temples, but in her own fashion, haphazard, refusing to let her dragoman inundate her with his flow of undigested knowledge, content to sit on the warm stones and dream among the ruins. Thus she went often to Karnak, without plan or guide-book, an offended Moussa left with the watchman at the Great Pylon, and wandered alone through those stupendous fanes of fruitless prayer, gathering to her wounded heart from broken columns and images overturned the old wisdom of the psalmist: 'Vanity, vanity, all is vanity!' . . .

Cradock and his story she had put to one side in her mind. Most things in her living life seemed so remote from this land of the dead, — dead kings, dead causes, dead religions. Ismail, that frightening night on the ship, Cradock recoiling from her cruel words, Cairo, and the Prince taking her hands beneath the stars . . . these memories, though so recent, were yet of a past that she had locked away like the letters of a dead lover. As for Cradock, she knew that his work was here; but it seemed hard to place him. What room was there for serious science amid all these elegant, wealthy tourists, this concentrated organization of guides and donkeys and picnic lunches for the determined sight-seer?

One day she rode over to the Valley of the Kings. As a change from the hotel she thought she would lunch high up among the hills that frown down upon the ter-

raced temple of Queen Hatshepsut. They made an early start, for the day promised to be warm, and the perspiration soon ran on the brown cheeks of the donkey-boy who, the luncheon-basket on his shoulder, the hem of his ragged smock in his mouth, padded along behind her donkey.

They followed the well-worn track to the Royal Necropolis. From the mud flats of the Nile where a solitary heron stood sentinel, where the black-and-white kingfishers were poised above the river, beating the air with their wings, to drop into the water with a plop, they took the sandy road that leads to the irrigation canal. Brown men, naked save for a loincloth, hocked in the barren melon patches. In the fields, amid yellow dust-clouds, dim figures shook the phosphates out of sacks upon the ground.

The morning was laden with drowsy sounds. By the little canal bridge the pigeons cooed restfully in their square tower-house among the palms. Under a thatched roof a water-wheel creaked, its melancholy protest blending with the high quavering song of the berry-brown urchin that, perched upon the shafts, goaded the reluctant oxen. From the canal-bank a pipe called flutily over the still air.

Flat on his back among the green *berseem* a naked boy drew two or three sweet notes from a reed. He played for himself, heedless of the traffic of the dyke, the trains of mangy, hair-worn camels slouching under their tossing loads of sugar-cane, the files of tiny donkeys slung with water-jars. Below him under the sloping bank the water-hoists grunted and the water gurgled in the little trenches as the *shaduf* men, muscles aripple on their gleaming, coffee-hued backs, emptied the water-skins

and stooped to fill them again. From tree to tree the vivid green bee-eaters flashed, their wings like burnished copper against the light, and in the dust, marked with the prints of a myriad weary feet, the pretty Egyptian doves bobbed and pecked.

Where a side road dipped away to lead to the Colossi of Memnon, twin grey shapeless figures looming through the heat haze, a shambling youth in a white skull-cap, broken canvas shoes showing below his dusty black robe, was holding a donkey. It was a fine upstanding beast, of the Assiut breed, with high-pommelled Moorish saddle of scarlet saffron leather and a red-and-yellow saddle-cloth. Close by a trim figure in riding-clothes, crop nervously switching gaitered legs, stood in deep conversation with a fierce-looking, black-envisaged native, a burly *fellah* with large and calloused feet. He was an unprepossessing individual, for he had lost an eye, and the red and gaping socket served to focus attention on the unusual shiftiness of its surviving partner.

Something about the sleekness of the perfectly fitting riding-kit, or it may have been the even blackness of the hair, caught Jean Averil's eye as she jogged past the turning. She reined in her donkey.

'Mr. Simonou!' she called out.

The man in the riding-clothes started so violently that, as he swung round, he dropped his whip.

'Hallo, Mrs. Averil,' he cried. Then he snapped out a word in Arabic to his companion, who raised his hand in understanding and, turning, set off to run at a long easy lope down the road to the Colossi. Simonou picked up his whip and came across to Jean.

'I didn't know that you were at Luxor,' he said as he lifted his hat. He let his eye run with swift approval

over her dress, the beige felt hat, the long tussore riding-coat, the Bedford cord breeches, and high brown suède boots. 'Tired of Cairo already?'

'I came out to Egypt for a rest, you know,' she laughed back at him, stooping to pat her donkey's damp neck. 'Life was too strenuous in Cairo for me, so I ran away. How long have you been here? You're not stopping at the Hotel, are you?'

'No, I'm on a *dahibeah*, a private steamer, you know, on the river. I came up from Cairo for a few days to see about some property that I'm interested in. Are you making a long stay?'

Jean shrugged her shoulders. 'I don't know,' she answered frankly. 'I love this place. I feel to-day as if I should like to stay for ever.'

Simonou glanced at the luncheon-basket lying at the feet of the saucer-eyed donkey-boy.

'You're off for a day's sight-seeing, I observe?'

She shook her head laughingly. 'I'm afraid I'm a rotten tripper,' she retorted. 'I just loaf about as the fancy leads me.' With her ivory fly-whisk she pointed at the warm brown hills. 'Do you see that mountain? Well, Moussa and I are going to climb up it until we find a nice patch of shade and there I'm going to have my luncheon And after that I shouldn't be surprised if I went to sleep. However,' she went on, looking down at him whimsically from the saddle, 'if you're feeling energetic, I dare say there's enough luncheon for two . . .'

'There's nothing I should like better,' Simonou protested — and his glittering black eye bore out his assertion — 'but they're expecting me back at Luxor.' He glanced at his wrist. 'By George, I must be off.' He doffed his hat and gave her his hand. 'Good-bye,

Mrs. Averil. I'm so glad to have seen you.' He clambered onto his donkey and cantered off, his ragged attendant running behind.

Jean shook the reins and resumed her journey. It came into her mind as rather odd that Simonou should have expressed no wish to see her again. But it was only a passing idea that died as soon as it was born.

They dismounted at the barrier outside the Valley of the Kings. At that early hour neither the gabble of dragomans nor the lagging feet of tourists profaned the silence of the rockbound gorges. From the watchmen's huts above King Tut-ankh Amen's tomb a wisp of blue smoke curled into the still air.

Moussa had paused to send the donkeys round by road to meet them after luncheon at Queen Hatshepsut's Temple. But Jean did not linger. She passed the high-vaulted entrances of the tombs bereft of their secrets and, where the road divided, began to mount alone the steep and winding path that clambers aloft to the narrow saddle rising like a barrier between the valley and the rocky sepulchres of Deir el-Bahari.

It was an exhausting climb. Once she paused and far below saw the fluttering brown robe of Moussa as the dragoman, the luncheon-basket in his hand, struggled sweating up the slope. She had taken off her hat, and, as she neared the top, a gusty breeze from the river blew her straight brown hair about her ears.

She halted on the little plateau for Moussa to come up. At her feet the whole plain between her mountain and the distant hills of Al-Tarif spread its flatness. Between two broad green strips the river snaked its glistening way. Beyond it the hotel was like a little cardboard model, with the brown huddle of the Luxor

Temple on the one side and farther along, like a couple of child's bricks standing upright on grass, the Great Pylon of Karnak emerging from the trees. At her back, hundreds of feet below, every stone of the Valley of the Kings stood out hard and sharp and gleaming white in the transparent air.

At length Moussa, dripping as only a native can perspire, joined her. Together they threaded a white bridle-path that, for centuries, the unshod foot of little donkeys had hammered out of the flaky limestone of the ridge. For more than an hour they walked along the saddle, now mounting, now descending, now scrambling up crumbling steps sliced out between the boulders, now sliding down a rubble-strewn slope.

Presently Moussa's brown finger shot out pointing below them. They had halted on a bold brown cliff projecting like a buttress from the rocky mass of the mountain.

'Beit Lomas!' announced the dragoman.

'What?' Jean asked, stroking the hair out of her eyes.

'This is house of Meestair Lomas what make excavation at Deir el-Bahari!' he explained.

Jean looked down. Tucked away under the mountain, in a semi-circular opening among the cliffs, a low projecting roof scarred the face of the rock. There was a little verandah from which a path, like an end of white thread, straggled down to the road through the valley.

'A very good man, Meestair Lomas,' Moussa observed. 'He know very much about antikas. He buy much from Luxor dealers. He now in England. We very sorry about this . . .'

Lomas! The name seemed familiar to Jean. Lomas!

It was not quite that. It was Lomax, of course; the man for whom Cradock worked.

'You mean Professor Lomax, don't you?' she said.

'Yes, Professor Lomas,' the dragoman repeated genially.

She glanced down at the house with interest. How terribly lonely it looked! Not a human habitation in sight or any scrap of green, nothing but the bare brown emptiness of the mountain and the valley. She wondered whether Cradock lived in a place like this.

'Do you know Mr. Cradock, Moussa?' she asked suddenly.

'Meestair Ceradock very quiet man,' the dragoman replied. 'Nobody know Meestair Ceradock!'

Jean smiled to herself. She thought the description very apt.

In a patch of shade thrown by a gigantic boulder Jean ate her lunch and then leaned back, her face to the sky, 'listening to the silence' as she put it to herself. Sometimes a kite cried plaintively high above the valley and once from the vast blue vault of heaven descended the rising call of a lark. Then, Moussa having eaten his fill, the luncheon things were repacked and by a lower path they struck out for Deir el-Bahari and the temple.

The pinkish-brown pillars of the temple were in sight below them when, from under the hillside, the chant of many voices drifted up to their ears. Jean peered down. On the mountain's lower slope a chain of tiny figures, baskets on their shoulder, ran between a gap in the rock and a sort of dump below. A cloud of fine white dust enveloped them, so dense that at times it all but obscured them from view.

They were excavating, Moussa told her. At Jean's

request he led her down a precipitate path that debouched at the side of that gaping tear in the mountain face. She stopped by a boulder at the foot of the path and watched three or four natives passing baskets out of the yawning black hole to the hands of light-footed little boys who sang as they ran.

A swarthy foreman stood at the head of the chain, a black menacing figure, in his muscular hand a cane. From time to time he brought it thwacking down upon the fluttering garments of the small gangsters to speed them on their way. Something about the man was familiar to Jean and as he, catching sight of her, looked up, she recognized the one-eyed native whom she had seen with Simonou on the canal-bank.

The man turned away at once; for, from the depths of the mountain, a deep voice had started: 'Ali!' Then, out of the stifling dust-cloud that whirled about the entrance of the hole, a tall figure emerged.

It was David Cradock.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PASSAGE BY THE MOSQUE

From head to foot he was plastered with the fine white dust. It lay thickly on his khaki clothes — woollen shirt open at the neck, drill trousers: it blanched the sunburn of his cheeks: it hung from his very eyebrows; and, as he stooped at the shaft entrance to pick up his white sun helmet, Jean saw that his crisp black hair was powdered, too.

All work ceased at his appearance. Out of a hundred brown faces, smeared white like his, wide eyes stared up. He spoke a word to the one-eyed foreman and the men shambled towards the shaft: then he made a brusque gesture of the hand and, as if he had pulled a lever, the whole gang started into life again. The chant was resumed, the chain began to move afresh, the dust whirled once more.

Almost concealed by her boulder, Jean gazed in wonder at him. This was not the sombre hermit of the ship. There was an air of joyous alertness about this self-possessed figure in khaki, of quiet competence, of restrained authority, as though he were aware and proud of his sway over the dim swarming figures that flashed through the dancing sand-cloud. He radiated fitness. He looked trained to the last ounce. Even his clothes seemed to fit him better. And his face was almost happy.

For an instant he rested at the head of the shaft, watching the chain go by. Suddenly his hand shot out and gripped the shoulder of a little lad. It was a boy

of ten or so, head shaven beneath his round white skull-cap, a single grimy garment flapping about his spindly legs. One of his dust-white feet was swathed in a filthy, blood-stained rag and he limped as he ran.

Cradock dropped on one knee and drew the boy down to him. With deft and tender fingers he removed the dirty bandage and disclosed a small brown foot, cruelly swollen. He clapped his hands and shouted in Arabic. From a tent lower down the slope a native servant appeared. Cradock gave him an order and the man, returning to the tent, presently approached with a basin of water and a towel. Cradock tore the towel across. With one half he bathed and wiped clean the little foot: with the other he improvised a dressing which he laid skilfully about the wound. The urchin submitted to everything without a word or a whimper, his big dark eyes fixed on Cradock's face. When he had finished Cradock placed the child in the servant's arms and the man bore him away to the tent.

'Ali!'

Cradock's voice rang out sharply. His face was very stern as he turned towards the shaft and the blue eyes seemed to smoulder in their setting of dusty brown. The foreman's head and shoulders appeared above the mouth of the pit. With a brusque gesture, such as a man might use to a dog, Cradock summoned him forth.

In hoarse guttural Arabic the Englishman barked out a question. With a deprecating gesture the foreman began to explain, perhaps, as his rather cringing manner suggested, to excuse himself. But Cradock cut him off short. He burst into a flood of growling, throaty Arabic, snarling, menacing . . .

The chain slackened pace. Impish faces grinned

delightedly through their dust-smears. The men, working furiously waist-high at the top of the shaft, as they took advantage of the lull to wipe the grit out of their eyes, nudged one another and wagged their heads in enjoyment. Still Cradock spoke on, never raising his voice above a deep monotone growl.

Of what he was saying Jean, of course, did not understand a word; but she could read the story plainly enough in the foreman's face. Across Cradock's broad shoulders she could see the native's features and note how, under that savage tongue-lashing, their brownness deepened to chocolate, how the single eye grew hot and the great bristling moustache trembled. Now and again the Arab seemed to wince and his dark eye would flash an uneasy look to one side as, his brown hands hanging limply down, he stood and sought to weather the bitter flood of invective. At last, on a rasping monosyllable, Cradock broke off, turned on his heel, and strode downhill to the tent.

Jean let him disappear behind the white canvas flap before she proceeded on her way. Then she turned to Moussa. The dragoman was simmering with delight.

'Meestair Ceradock speak *very* well in our language,' he gurgled ecstatically. 'He know it better than many Arabic men . . .'

'What was it all about?' asked Jean as they moved down the path towards the valley.

'Meestair Ceradock is very sorry from the *rais*, the head man of the boys, leddy,' he explained, 'because he make this boy to work with hurted foot. Meestair Ceradock, he make him much botherings about this . . .'

'I should think so,' Jean exclaimed. 'A dreadful wound like that! The man's a cruel brute!'

Moussa clicked with his tongue against his palate, deprecatingly.

'Him a very little hurt, this *wallah*. One day, two days — like this — and the boy all right. Meestair Ceradock, he say to Ali very angry things in our language . . .'

His eyes fixed on the white dust of the path, Moussa smiled broadly in sublime enjoyment of a scene that he would recount to appreciative audiences for many days to come at the Ramses Bar where the Luxor dragomans foregather. East as West there is no joke so palatable as the discomfiture of others. He balanced his open palms from side to side in hesitation, groping for his English.

'He tell him many insults in Arabic language. He say he son of the house dog. He say his father steal slippers in the mosque. He tell him like he the son of sixty men and his mother leddy pig . . .'

'Good gracious!' said Jean, beginning to laugh.

'He call him such a piece of dirt. "You like the child of my old slipper what I throw away," Meestair Ceradock tell him. He pray to Allah to make black Ali's face. He say rather he have for *rais* a *hanuti* he can trust . . .'

'A *what?*' Jean asked, breathless with helpless laughter.

'A man what makes washing of dead peoples before they entrance them in the ground, very low man in Mohammedan religion . . .'

'Good Heavens! . . .'

'Many angry things like this Meestair Ceradock tell him. Next time Ali make work a boy with hurts, Meestair Ceradock take a stick and beat him, Meestair Ceradock say!'

'And quite right, too!' Jean declared.

'This Ali very bad man,' observed Moussa reflectively. 'I think perhaps he make some trouble against Meestair Ceradock . . .'

At the foot of the long ramp up which, more than thirty centuries ago, the light chariots raced to the temple of the Pharaonic Queen Elizabeth, their steeds waited. Mounting, they rode back to the Nile through the golden glory of the afternoon.

At the river-brink they left their donkeys to drink their fill of the turgid streak and, saddle-free, to roll luxuriantly in the warm sand. They crossed by one of the white hotel feluccas. There was no wind and the curving sail was furled. The dark-skinned boatmen rowed them across, crooning a little song on two or three notes to lighten their labour when, in mid-stream, they felt the current tug at their long oars. At the landing-stage Jean dismissed Moussa for the day and walked slowly up the path between the beds of bright flowers.

On the roadway before the hotel all Luxor seemed to be congregated. Tourists were coming in from jaunts by donkey or carriage, there was the gleam of light frocks under the cool arcades where pretty women fingered the rich fabrics of the Indian silk-merchants, and above on the terrace the parapet, where the tea-tables were set out, was a frieze of elegance.

Jean was crossing the road when she heard someone cry her name. From beneath the arcades a white-clad figure came flying. 'Jean!' it called and waved.

'Molly!'

Jean Averil's mind flashed back to a long alley of dark pines, pleasantly scented with resin, and two young girls, one with straight brown hair, the other very

blonde, rather prim in their black convent dresses and little capes, collecting cones for the Sisters. She had not seen Molly Dalton since the days when they had been school-girls together at the convent in Brussels before the war.

Ten years ago! How old it made her feel! Ten years since that last breaking-up when, with all sorts of promises for the next term, they had parted in the pine-alley, never realising that there would be no next term, that the hush resting over that tranquil convent park was the calm before the storm. A month later, the streets of Brussels were to shake to the tramp of grey-green legions and the thunder of caissons and the air to tremble to the growl of distant guns. Jean had gone back to America and they had never met again. And here was pretty Molly Dalton now, as pretty as ever, with her bright pink cheeks and soft violet eyes, her golden locks lopped in obedience to fashion, but curving in undulating waves about her round white neck.

'Jean, darling!' cried Molly. 'You in Egypt! You appear like an angel from heaven. Come along quickly or he'll be gone!'

She seized Jean by the arm and hurried her along the riverside promenade.

'But Molly, where? Who?'

'At the temple! Colin! And to-morrow's the last day of the full moon. And Daddy's got a tummy-ache. Oh, do come quickly or he'll have left!'

'But, my dear, I'm filthy. I've been out all day. I've got to have a bath. And I must change . . .'

'It's all right. It's only Colin . . .'

'But who *is* Colin?'

'He's an artist. He's draughtsman to the Scottish

Exploration Society: they're digging out here. We're ... we're engaged. And, oh, Jean, you *are* married, aren't you? Yes, of course, you are. I remember.'

Jean Averil stopped, panting.

'My dear, you'll kill me!' she declared. 'I've been scrambling over the mountains all day and I can't keep up this pace. Where are we going?'

'Only as far as the Luxor Temple. Colin's sketching there. At least he was when I left him an hour ago ...'

She curved her hand about her mouth and called: 'Coo-ee!' From the mass of warm yellow columns at the end of the promenade, a distant hail floated back to them over the still air.

'Thank the Lord, he's still there!' said Molly. 'Come along, Jeanie. Colin will explain everything!'

In the square court where the double rows of pillars framed entrancing panels of the river glittering in the hot sunshine and the pink-stained hills beyond, a ruddy-headed youth in white drill rose up from behind an easel at their approach.

'Colin,' cried Molly, darting forward, 'we're saved. This is Jean Wilmot, who was my greatest friend at school in Brussels. And she's married. You sent me a bit of your wedding-cake from America, do you remember, Jeanie?'

Having previously wiped it on a rag, the youth extended his hand to Jean.

'This is simply fizzing,' he said gravely. 'How do you do? It's perfectly ripping of you to want to chaperon Molly. That makes it quite all right, doesn't it?'

Jean looked at Molly and laughed.

'You're still perfectly mad, Molly,' she said. 'Would one of you mind telling me what it's all about?'

'I say, Molly,' the youth expostulated, 'that's a bit thick. D'you mean to say you haven't told her?'

'*You* tell her, Colin,' the girl retorted, her pink cheeks flushed.

'Well,' began the young man slowly, 'it's like this. I'm with an excavation party and I live in a house out there on the mountain. Molly's set her heart on seeing the moon rise over the hills. To do that she's got to spend the night at my place, for the roads on the other side aren't too safe after dark, and anyway you'd never persuade a donkey-boy to travel at night on the other side: they're scared of their lives of *afrits* — ghosts, you know. The fellow I live with is going to Cairo this evening and his room will be free. Molly's Guv'nor was coming, but he's got Gyppie tummy and he says he's too ill. And to-morrow's the last night of the full moon. Molly won't be here for another moon, as she's going home next week. And obviously she can't come up and spend the night at my place alone. So I thought, that is to say, Molly suggested . . . if she could find a married woman . . .'

'Jean, you *will* come, won't you, darling?' Molly interrupted.

'We've only got two beds,' Colin continued. 'You can have my pal's room and Molly will have mine. I can doss down in the living-room. It isn't too uncomfortable, really. Of course, we haven't got electric light. But there's a bathroom and . . . and a pretty fair cook. And Mohammed — that's the *suffragi* — doesn't make a bad butler-valet . . .'

'But what will Mr. Dalton say?' Jean temporised.

'Daddy? Oh, I'll fix Daddy!' cried Molly. 'Jean, you're a brick!'

'It's tremendously good of you, Mrs. . . . Mrs. . . .' the youth began.

'Great Scott, I haven't introduced you!' exclaimed Molly. 'Mr. Colin Beck, Mrs. . . .' She broke off. 'Oh, Jeanie, I've forgotten your married name!'

'Averil,' Jean prompted.

'And will you really help us out?' asked Colin.

'Of course I will, if you want me,' Jean told him. 'When is it to be? To-night? And how do we get there?'

'I think we'll make it to-morrow evening,' the young man rejoined. 'That will give me twenty-four hours to prepare for your suitable entertainment; besides, Molly's got to square her Guv'nor. I'll come down on my moke to-morrow afternoon and meet you both at the landing on the other side of the river at four o'clock . . .'

He began to pack up his easel.

'Molly, old thing,' he said, 'I'll have to finish this sketch for you another day. I've got to toddle now: it'll be dark in an hour and I've a long road to travel before I get home. Good-bye, Mrs. Averil: I think it's tremendously sporting of you to help Molly out.'

'You don't want to thank me,' Jean returned. 'I think it'll be perfectly thrilling. There won't be any lions roaming about, I hope?'

'Not quite,' grinned Colin. 'But you'll hear the jackals: they howl like blazes!'

'I'll walk down to the boat with you, Colin,' said Molly. 'Coming, Jean?'

'I think I'll sit for a bit and watch the sun go down,' Jean answered. 'It's so perfect here. Where are you staying, Molly?'

'At the Luxor Hotel.'

'Well, come and dine with me to-night, will you? I'm at the Winter Palace.'

'Can't darling. I've got to dine with Daddy in his bedroom. But I'll come to luncheon to-morrow!'

'Do that and we'll start off afterwards to meet your young man. Bye-bye, children!'

They waved to her gaily and, arm-in-arm, disappeared among the tangle of broken columns. For a few seconds Jean heard their footsteps on the stones. Then they died away; and she had the temple to herself.

It was the perfect hour of sunset. The courtyard was bathed in pinkish light. Between the smooth ochre pillars the river ran red, reflecting the glory of the western sky, and purple shadows dimmed the rugged outline of its stern sentinels, the hills. There was not a breath of wind. From the cluster of houses huddled together above the temple a little smoke rose straight into the air. Outside from the water-front there drifted in the murmur of the town, the scraping of feet, the clip-clop of hoofs and the melancholy chant of the sailors at work on the steamers.

Jean sat and brooded. She was only three years older than Molly Dalton; but the sight of those two young things' happiness made her feel a hundred. What a self-centred thing love seemed to be, she reflected, and how it always sought to promote its own ends! Molly had not asked her a word about her husband. Jean smiled indulgently. Why should the child, with her head full of thoughts of her Colin? A nice, clean young fellow, Jean thought, and artistic. His hands showed that. How his eye had lighted up as she and Molly had come into the temple! It reminded her of Mark in those early days. When she came late to the polo to see him play,

how his eye used to search the stands for her in the intervals of the game. Ah! the magic of the past! . . .'

A little breeze, cold and damp like the breath from an iceberg, rattled the sand on the floor of the temple. While she was dreaming, darkness had dropped suddenly. Away to the left yellow lights were winking on the riverside, and on the farther bank of the Nile the red flame of a bonfire leapt up eagerly into the falling night.

She rose from the column base on which she had been sitting and shivered a little. How often had they warned her against remaining out of doors after sundown in Egypt without a wrap! She looked at her watch. It was nearly seven o'clock. She would have time to walk back through the town before she changed for dinner. She would take the passage by the mosque, a favourite way of hers. It was a little longer than the road by the river and the exercise would warm her.

In the forecourt of Ramses II, behind the pylon with the seated images of that mighty monarch, stands the humble little mosque of Abu'l Haggag, named after a Moslem holy man whose revered remains repose in a canopied sepulchre within. The legend runs that he discovered buried in the once-splendid temple the gold and silver treasure of Amenhotep III and, lest this wealth should contaminate his fellow-men, planted his mosque upon the hiding-place of the treasure to keep it for all time inviolate and innocuous. It rears its crazy little whitewashed minaret from a corner of the ruined temple and the very pillars that the ancient kings raised for the worship of Amon are built, for the greater glory of Allah, into its massive walls.

Beside the mosque a narrow passage runs between

two high walls, a romantic place, with its low and beetling entrance, which Jean on many a visit had peopled with personages from the Arabian Nights. It debouched upon an untidy open space between the flat-roofed mud houses whence a lane led narrowly to join the seething clamour of the Souk — the market street.

The passage was almost dark when Jean reached it. At the end an oil-lamp suspended from the wall threw a glimmer of light. She was about to emerge into the open when on the top of the high wall about a foot above her head a turban showed suddenly, and then a swarthy face.

Instinctively she shrank back as a native hastily scrambled over the wall and dropped lightly to the ground almost at her feet. He carried something wrapped in a white cloth. Without speaking, without even looking at her, he thrust the bundle into her hands, and, turning, fled noiselessly upon his bare feet across the open. She saw his garment flutter as he sped round the corner of the lane. Then the night swallowed him up.

CHAPTER XIV

THE STATUETTE OF ANUBIS

THE package was small and heavy with sharp corners. So astonished was Jean by the native's sudden apparition that, before she knew it, the bundle was in her hands and the man had vanished. Horrid memories of the Thousand and One Nights crowded in upon her. What was this offering thus mysteriously thrust upon her? A freshly severed head? For that it was too angular. Perhaps a human hand? No, it was too heavy . . .

With shaky fingers she began to remove the cloth that enveloped the package, drawing nearer to the light to see what she was at. A sudden rustle close at hand affrighted her. Drawing swiftly back into the protective gloom of the passage, the bundle unopened in her hands, she watched with fascinated eyes a second turban bulk white above the top of the wall. Then a white-clad figure straddled the coping, a brown leg swung over, and lightly, even as the other man, the newcomer leapt down.

So swiftly had the first man acted that she had not caught even a glimpse of his face. But the second man paused at the bottom of the wall, darting sharp glances to left and right. In the pool of yellow light cast by the mirky oil-lamp hanging from its bracket on the wall, Jean saw a handsome copper-coloured face with proud, fierce eyes very bright beneath the white turban.

Lean and lithe and eager the man stood quite still. He seemed to be listening. Jean leant back against the wall of the passage, desperately hoping that she was far enough back within its dark recesses for her light riding-clothes to escape detection. For a full minute the man hesitated. Then he turned and deliberately stared in her direction.

Jean held her breath. The pounding of her heart was so loud in her ears that she thought that the listening figure must also hear it. She was too frightened to move or to speak. It did not occur to her that the obvious thing was to walk straight out and pass the stranger. It was as though she were screwed down to where she stood palpitating in the black and narrow way, her limbs powerless as in a nightmare.

For one awful instant she thought the man was coming down the passage towards her. In effect he took a step forward in the direction of the mosque. But then he checked himself and, to her unspeakable relief, swung abruptly round and made off towards the lane that led to the Souk.

She leant back against the dry mud wall, trembling all over. She shivered a little in her light clothes; but her brow was damp. She dared not face again the darkness of the passage and beyond it the eerie gloom of the temple barred by the long shadows of the columns gaunt against the sky. Hastily she thrust the package into the deep side pocket of her long-skirted riding-coat and hurried into the open, seeking the lights and voices of the Souk.

As she ran round the corner of the lane she bumped violently against a man who, breathing hard, came dashing from the opposite direction. He was a Euro-

pean, in breeches and gaiters. He did not stop, but, with a muttered expletive, thrust her rudely on one side and pounded across the open space towards the dark mouth of the passage.

It was Simonou. There was no mistaking those shifty black eyes, the yellow face now bathed in moisture. But Jean did not wait for recognition or apology. She had but one desire and that was to regain the hotel as fast as possible. Even the Souk, the yellow lanterns of its little booths dimly illuminating the sea of dark faces drifting its length, was preferable to the black hush of that passage, the terror of those noiseless figures dropping from the wall . .

But the hotel's bright welcome soon allayed her fears. The big hall with its lights, the Swiss porter's friendly smile as he handed her some letters and a telegram, the comforting air of the little groups gossiping over before-dinner cocktails at the wicker tables, quickly restored her to a normal frame of mind. As she went up in the lift, she began to feel ashamed of her terror and when, in her bedroom, her riding-coat flung across a chair, she stood up in her silk shirt and breeches to read her mail she had almost forgotten her adventure.

The wire was from Hussein. Sheikh Abdullah, the fortune-teller, would be in Cairo for one day on the following Sunday — three days hence. He was coming to Said Hussein the same evening. Would Mrs. Averil dine with Hussein and Madame Alexandrovna on Sunday night? If she were to be in Cairo, he would send the car to Shepheard's to fetch her. The reply was prepaid.

Quit Luxor already? It was rather a wrench. Un-

conscious of the fact that Fate had already decided the matter for her, Jean left the question unanswered in her mind and looked at her other letters, a fat bulletin of Boston news in her sister Anne's untidy writing — Jean put this on one side for perusal later; some bills from Paris; a scrawl from Mrs. Richborough enclosing some snapshots of Jean on a camel taken at the Great Pyramid. There was also a note from the hotel doctor who presented his compliments to Mrs. Averil and would be glad to see her at her convenience regarding her maid, Miss Simmons.

Jean laid down the doctor's letter and looked about her. With Simmons absent, something seemed missing from the familiar surroundings of her bedroom. It was like a policeman without his helmet or a car without a steering-wheel. For Simmons was in bed, Simmons whose proudest boast had ever been that she had never 'known a day's illness in her life' — qualified presumably in respect of *mal de mer*. That ironclad spirit which had never struck its flag to man born of woman had lowered its colours to that insidious traitor known to travellers in the East as 'Gyppie tummy.' What generations of hotel-keepers had failed to achieve — French rapacity, Swiss insolence, German bounce, Italian brigandage, she had bearded them all in her time — the fell visitant had accomplished. Gyppie tummy had 'got the better' of Yours respectfully, H. Simmons.

For days Simmons had rejected Jean's urgent counsel of 'a day in bed.' Nor would she see a doctor. She had 'no use for those fellows' and still less for the 'new-fangled ways' of modern medicine. Her day's duty done, pale-lipped and grim, she would retire, like

a stricken animal, to her modest bedroom in the maids' quarters and, behind locked doors, administer to herself certain ancient specifics reputed sovereign in the strange pharmacopeia of the English lower classes.

But that morning she was so obviously unfit to be about that Jean had insisted on sending her back to bed and had arranged for the hotel doctor to visit her in the course of the day. His report, delivered to Jean that evening after dinner, was short and simple: amœbic dysentery. The woman had disregarded the warning symptoms. She must go on strict diet and receive the special treatment prescribed for such cases. Yes, certainly, she would be better in hospital: the nurses (the doctor rubbed his chin with a whimsical air) would keep her in order; but hospital would mean Cairo. By all means he would wire and make the necessary arrangements. There was no great urgency; Friday or Saturday would be ample time . . .

Her conference with the doctor and ensuing necessity of breaking the news to a feeble but outraged Simmons fully occupied Jean's mind that evening. She was quite touched to find that Simmons was less indignant at the admission of defeat that her transfer to hospital implied than at the prospect of her mistress being left without a maid.

'Whatever you'll do without me, Madam, I'm shore I don't know,' she remarked in accents heavy with foreboding, an extraordinary figure as she sat up in bed in a high-necked, long-sleeved cotton night-dress, her scant hair twisted into two thin plaits. 'It don't seem hardly safe to leave you alone amongst all these black savages, popping into your bedroom at all hours, as bold as brass; — given me a proper turn they have,

many a time. And there's your underwear to iron *and* your mending to do and, dear, dear, I don't know what else . . .'

'Don't you bother your head about me, Simmons,' said Jean. 'I looked after myself when I was living at home with my mother in Boston. And you'll only be away for a fortnight, you know . . .'

'And a nice state your things were in when I took you over, Madam,' the maid retorted grimly. 'However,' she added darkly, 'you'll miss me when I'm gone, I shouldn't wonder . . .'

'You're not to talk like that, Simmons. I'm going to come and see you every day in hospital . . .'

'Oh, Madam!' The gaunt face stared up at her incredulously. 'But . . . is Madam returning to Cairo, too?'

'Good gracious,' Jean exclaimed, 'you don't suppose I'd let you go down alone, do you, Simmons? Of course I'm coming!'

She stood up to go. A little warmth stole into the maid's hard eyes and lingered there, shame-facedly, like a pickpocket in a church. Simmons smiled. She actually smiled!

'Thank you, Madam, for all your kindness,' she said. 'It's always been a pleasure to work for Madam!'

Jean felt a lump rising in her throat. A smile and then a compliment from Simmons! She must, indeed, be ill. Jean gave the bony, work-hardened hand a little squeeze and quietly stole away. It was only when, on returning to her bedroom, she saw Said Hussein's telegram lying on the dressing-table that she realised that Simmon's plight had answered it for her. She scribbled out a reply on the prepaid form accepting

the Prince's invitation for Sunday evening and, ringing the bell, gave the message to the chamber-boy to send off.

All this time a certain small but heavy object, enveloped in a grimy linen cloth, was reposing unnoticed in the deep pocket of Jean's riding-coat. The garment seemed to sprawl in an attitude of protest across the chair where Jean had tossed it on changing for dinner. Hours ago it should have been brushed free of the white mountain dust and carefully pressed by the conscientious Simmons, and added to the select company of Jean's frocks in the wardrobe. Yet here was midnight almost and still no sign of their attendant, whispered amongst themselves the dresses rustling on their rail. And the Averil woman, in a kimono, was brushing her hair before the mirror, while her riding-coat, the stains of the road yet upon it, lay abandoned in disgraceful neglect upon a chair!

And here Jean, reduced to the unwonted necessity of putting her clothes away, ultimately found it. Its unaccustomed weight, as she took it up, brought back in a flash her adventure of the evening. She spread the riding-coat across the table and with some difficulty, for the bundle fitted rather narrowly in the pocket, extricated the mysterious package.

When at last the bundle lay on the table before her, she hesitated. Her interview with the doctor, her visit to Simmons, had driven her experience in the passage by the mosque entirely from her mind. Now it came rushing back to her memory. She thought of that figure tumbling headlong from the wall and the package thrust into her hands: there stirred in her recollection

again something of the panic she had felt when a second white apparition had loomed above the coping of the wall. The copper-coloured face! Those burning eyes . . . !

The linen cloth enveloping the bundle was knotted once loosely, paper crackling within. Jean unfastened the knot and, pulling the linen apart, disclosed a sheet of an Arabic newspaper. Very gingerly she tore a corner and a yellowish surface came into view, cool to the touch. Then resolutely she ripped the paper across and found within a little metal figure.

It represented a crouching animal, with a long muzzle and high upstanding ears, something like an Alsatian sheep-dog. The eyes, of glass or some similar substance — wide open, staring and surrounded by ovals of black — were extraordinarily lifelike, and with the snarling fangs disclosed lent the animal a ferocious and challenging air. The figure was made of some dull yellow metal, discoloured with age, and here and there it was coated with brownish earth. Its base was an oblong pedestal on the front of which were hieroglyphics in long bands.

Jean moistened a towel and gently rubbed some of the dust off the dog's back. The metal gleamed brightly. She wondered if it were gold. In any case it was a charming little image, executed with extraordinary conscientiousness and fidelity. The muscles seemed to ripple on the long back and at any moment, one would think, the animal might spring.

She knew it at once for one of the gods of Egypt. She had seen a dog like this before on the walls of the tombs. She picked up her guide-book and fluttered through the preface to find the pictures of the gods. Ah, here

it was! A man, grasping a sceptre, a dog's head on his shoulders. 'Anubis' was the name beneath the print.

She turned to the list of gods and read:

ANUBIS, *god of the dead, whose function was connected with interment. The dog was sacred to him.*

The god of the dead! Standing back from the table, she surveyed the little figure gleaming dully under the electric light and found it grim — grim and rather horrible. Impulsively, she wrapped its cloth about it again and thrust it into a drawer. Then, her mind in a maze, she switched off the light, opened her window on the Nile lying black in the moonlight, and, creeping under the mosquito curtains, went to bed.

CHAPTER XV

A FOOTFALL ON THE VERANDAH

'*Ya Mohammed!*'

A small black face raised itself level with the verandah floor, peering through the balustrade. 'The Pasha and two *Sitts* arrive!'

'*Ya salaam!*'

With this hasty exclamation the servant scrambled to his feet from his squatting position on the verandah, his brown hands grasping the silver he had been cleaning. He leaned over the rail and descried below, amid a little whirl of dust at the head of the valley, a man and two women, three figures in white, cantering along on donkeys. Leaning back in their saddles, the riders came careering down the narrow ribbon of road that wound its way through the scarred and desolate valley now flooded with the rich deep gold of the afternoon sun. The smart reverberation of the donkeys' hoofs and the shrill cries of the donkey-boys urging them on, as they padded behind, were plainly audible in the still air.

'By the head of my father, the imp of Satan speaks the truth,' exclaimed Mohammed despairingly. 'It is Meestair Beck already: I see his head flaming like a sword in the sun. Run to the kitchen, thou child of shame, and see if the water boils! *Ya salaam,* they are before their time . . .

He made a swoop across the wooden rail to cuff the shaven head of the little black boy who pranced in his

white shift before the house. The child, who had a bandaged foot, ducked, laughing, and hobbled across the dusty space before the house to a shed-like building and open stoop in front, where the kitchen lay. Mohammed turned back to the verandah to cast a final expert glance over the tea-table.

Three cups, plates, spoons, and forks, milk and sugar shielded by little beaded muslin covers from the flies, the thin bread-and-butter protected by a plate, likewise the cream cakes that represented a special journey by donkey — fifteen miles there and back — to the hotel at Luxor: the purple Bougainvillæa blossoms that stood in jam-jars he had brought back with him on the same trip; on a side table the cigarettes, matches, the whisky decanter, siphon, glasses . . . *tamam!* All was well. The red-slippered feet encased in a pair of Colin Beck's heather-mixture socks scraped softly over the concrete floor as the *suffragi* pottered about the table, whisking the cloth to rights. Then his white robe and scarlet sash were swallowed up in the cool dimness of the living-room lying behind closed shutters at the back of the verandah.

He laid out his handful of silver on the sideboard where the champagne and fruit for that evening's anxiously planned dinner stood ready. The room was in pleasant contrast with the quivering glare of the rocky valley, a restful, quiet place with its little circular dome, distempered a cool green like the walls, its brown-and-white native rugs, its water-colour drawings of the temples framed on the walls, and on a case of shelves an assortment of antiquities, chipped pieces of glaze, fragments of painted sarcophagus, a mummied hand and part of a mummied skull, some blackened bronzes.

Through a door beyond was a long broad corridor leading to a back entrance with solar topees and hats, rather dusty, on a rack, and some clothes-presses. At the end the bathroom door stood open, disclosing a glimpse of a bare concrete floor, a towel-horse, a shower. Mohammed peeped in, made sure again that the towels were clean, and closed the door. Then he proceeded to carry out a final inspection of his careful preparations in the two bedrooms that led, right and left, off the passage.

The sun had moved round to the front since the morning and the rooms were in darkness. In succession he opened the windows and hooked back the shutters. Outside the windows the great cliffs, pinkish-mauve in the ever-changing light, towered above his head, seeming so close in the clear air that, though they were a good two hundred yards away, one might think to touch their flaky brown surface by leaning out upon the sill.

In each room Mohammed made a pause and with a certain air of pride surveyed his work. The mosquito curtains were spotless — had he not washed them out himself that morning? — and each white deal table was spread with a clean bath-towel by way of a cover. At the foot of each mirror stood in orderly array his purchases in the Souk that morning; to wit, a paper of enormous pins, each fully an inch and a half long, a packet of hairpins, a box of face-powder — *Crème de l'Orient*, of a violent mauve shade, strongly recommended by the wife of Morcos, the Copt linen-draper, a lively dame whose swarthy complexion was a source of continual annoyance to her. By each little camp-bed stood a bowl of purple blossoms, a candle, and a box of

matches, and, his proudest touch, stored in his memory from a year once spent in service with a Colonel's lady at Gezira, a bedside book.

These Mohammed, in Colin Beck's absence, had selected himself from the bookcase. As he was unable to read, he had let himself be guided by the richness of the bindings. For the room on the left he had chosen a massive tome handsomely bound in dark-blue cloth; for that on the right a volume in red morocco leather.

But now distant voices fell upon his ear. Mohammed hurried out upon the verandah. Up the path that led from the road to the verandah steps Colin Beck and his two guests were scrambling, a tattered lad in rear with a suitcase on his shoulder.

'Hullo, Mohammed, everything *tamam?*'

The servant, tall and slim and dignified, bowed, his hand on his heart.

'*Iwa*, Pasha!' he said in smiling confirmation.

'Then let's have tea at once. *Shây, hâlan!*'

'*Hadr*, Pasha!' and the *suffragi* hastened away to the kitchen.

'Ouf!' cried Molly, dropping into a chair. 'I warn you, Colin, I'm going to drink simply oceans of tea. My throat's like a lime-kiln. Isn't this a weird place for anybody to live, Jean?'

'I think it's perfectly wonderful!' sighed Jean, staring out across the wild and rugged valley.

The ball of the sun that had flamed down at them the length of their hot and dusty journey from the Nile had suddenly slid behind the horizon. The light had a bluish quality, like the fire of a diamond so that it was as though the valley and beyond it the hills that ringed it round were seen through a crystal. Slowly

the majestic procession of colours that marks the Egyptian sunset was marshalled in the glowing sky. From the low shed, whose flat white roof was visible fifty paces away to the left, came the drone of the servants' voices, and on the breast of the slope some little birds with a curious strident chirrup whirred from stone to stone. Beyond the house, raised up on brick pillars and sheltered under the lee of the massive cliffs, silence reigned, the silence of the empty spaces.

Jean let her eyes roam out across the horseshoe gap in the mountain where the house nestled to a huge projecting rock that stood out from the mass like a tower.

'I've seen this house before, you know,' she said over her shoulder to Colin Beck, who was throwing back the shutters of the living-room. 'From that high crag over there, I believe it was. Only I thought my dragoman said that Professor Lomax lived here . . .'

'They call it Lomax's house,' the youth rejoined, 'because old Lomax built it. But he only lives in it when he comes out. He hasn't been in Egypt for the past three seasons. Cradock's got it now . . .'

'Do you mean David Cradock?'

'Yep! This is really his place, you know. I've only been keeping house for him while he's been home on leave. I'm going back next week to the Scottish House where I really belong . . .'

'Then Mr. Cradock is the man you live with?'

'Sure! You've got his room. Funny old bird, Dave! Mysterious chap, too. You'd think he'd be lonely, stuck up here all by himself with only Mohammed for company, wouldn't you? Not he! Why, sometimes he wanders out after dinner and spends half the night in the hills as though even I and Mohammed were *de trop*

Or else he'll dress himself up in a *gallibiyeh* and a turban and go down to the native quarter of Luxor and sit in the Arab cafés smoking the *shibuk* and yarning by the hour. He's a ruddy marvel at the Arabic, they tell me, knows all the drill at prayers and can quote pages from the Korân. But, I say, don't you girls want to clean up before tea? I'll show you your rooms . . .'

He took them across the living-room and into the passage beyond. He flung open the door on the left:

'There you are,' he said to Jean. 'I hope you've got everything. Molly, you're opposite, in my room. Sing out if you want anything . . .'

Jean's dressing-case which, to save transport, she had shared with Molly, stood on a chair. She opened it and began to put out her things. Presently there came a tap at the door. Molly appeared giggling.

'My dear,' she said, '*have* you seen the powder? It's purple! They must think we're black. And the pins! They're about a foot long. Oh! You've got exactly the same! Aren't men a scream? Look at the book I found beside my bed.' She showed a red leather volume inscribed in gold lettering 'Annual Report of the Institute of Mechanical Engineering.' 'You've got one, too! Let's see what yours is. Oh, good Lord, it's German, isn't it?' She spelt out painfully: 'Das — Swastika — Zeichen — im — Leben — des — Orients. Hermann Sch . . . Schnu . . . Schnutzli!'

They both dropped down on the bed and laughed until the tears came.

'We'll rag the life out of Colin over this,' Molly promised. She lowered her voice. 'Have you got the little figure, Jean?'

'It's in my dressing-case!' Jean replied.

'Well, come on out to tea and we'll spring it on him!'

For such was the plot that the two girls had hatched between them at luncheon. Jean had told Molly of her adventure in the Luxor Temple and shown her the statuette. Molly had suggested that they should take counsel of Colin as to what the whole incident signified. But, at the same time, she wanted to have a rise out of her young man. With the condescension of an Egyptologist of two seasons' standing he had seen fit to brand as forgeries certain scarabs that Molly had purchased from the Luxor dealers. So, she told Jean, they would test him with the figure of Anubis.

Accordingly they took the image out upon the verandah and planted it on the tea-table between the bread-and-butter and the cream cakes. Presently Colin, who had retired to the bathroom to change his riding-clothes for a suit of grey flannel and brush smooth his flaming hair, came striding across the living-room. As he stepped out on the verandah and saw the little golden dog crouched menacing among the tea-things, he stopped short.

'Good Lord!' he exclaimed, 'where did that thing come from?'

He glanced from one girl to the other, then picked up the figure and examined it.

'Amenhotep Two,' he pronounced, after scanning the cartouche, 'and, great Cæsar's ghost, it's solid gold!'

He looked at Molly.

'Did *you* put it there?' he asked, bewildered.

'It's Jean's,' replied the girl carelessly. 'She bought it at Luxor. She wanted to know what you thought of it!'

'*You bought it at Luxor?*' the youth repeated in a dazed fashion. 'Would you mind telling me what you paid for it?'

'A pound,' said Jean faintly, and looked away.

'A . . .' Colin Beck gasped. 'Did you say a pound, *one pound?*'

'Yes,' Jean answered in a dying voice.

'But . . . but . . . a figure like this is worth anything . . .'

'If it's not a forgery,' Molly put in maliciously.

'Forgery?' exclaimed the boy. 'Look at the line! If it's not a genuine antika I'll eat my hat . . .'

Unable to contain themselves longer, the girls burst out laughing.

'Bravo, Mr. Beck,' said Jean. 'We couldn't pull your leg!'

'You did quite well, my child, quite well for a beginner,' Molly added.

'But what does it all mean?' the youth exclaimed.

Then Jean told him how the statuette had come into her possession.

Beck's face grew grave as he heard her story.

'The thing's stolen, of course,' was his comment at last. 'But where does it come from? You know it's a perfect gem of its kind and almost priceless. The best thing you can do, I think, is to let me show it to Cradock and hear what he has to say about it. He'll be back the day after to-morrow. There's a safe in the living-room; it will be quite secure there for the time being. Cradock knows the excavation game from A to Z. He'll tell us what to do!'

Readily Jean assented to this proposal. She was silent as Colin, with Molly dancing at his heels, carried

the figure into the living-room and locked it away in the small wall safe. As a matter of fact, she was not thinking much about the statuette at all. Rather she was pondering the oddness of the chance, the inscrutable fatality, that kept putting this lonely, strange man in her path. The incident of the cabins and their meeting in the Captain's room on board ship, her talk with Bastable, the fortuitous encounter with Molly which had landed her, not merely in Cradock's house, but in his room, his very bed — though her mood was grave, the notion tickled her sense of humour — and now this further link of the statuette between them; the chain of circumstances oppressed her. It made her a little uneasy. Fate, when it reveals its irresistible sway over mortals, is an awe-inspiring thing. Like the Gorgon's head it can turn men to stone . . .

They sat long over the tea-table while the tones darkened on the hills and the round silver disc of the moon edged itself above the horizon in a sky like shot silk, azure at the mountains' rugged outline, deepening as it mounted to mauve. Then, while the after-glow was paling in the west, the three of them sallied forth for a scramble among the rocks until a gonging from the house summoned them in to dinner.

They dined at the long table in the living-room. The last vestige of light had blanched in the sky; the last bat had swooped to cover in the yawning tombs and mummy-chambers that pitted the sides of the valley. The great yellow moon cast long shadows upon the broad verandah and peered in through the open door at the table, with its shaded lights, its masses of purple blossom, and the gold-foiled necks of the champagne bottles emerging from a bucket on the floor.

They had to drink their wine from tumblers and there was the incident of the fish. Colin, despising the woolly and tasteless flesh of the monsters of the Nile, had made a special journey to Luxor in search of soles from Alexandria. But it is a long trail and a hot trail from the Mediterranean shores to the hills beyond the Nile, and when the fish was served . . . well, they sat and waited for the omelette which Mohammed, fleeing before Colin's furious glances, rushed to the kitchen to order. There was no gravy with their cutlets, but this was probably not unconnected with a distant crash outside where dim figures scurrying in the moonlight showed that Mohammed had pressed into service the assortment of relatives and friends that every Berberi maintains in the kitchen. Still, as Molly remarked consolingly, there was plenty to drink and that was the main thing.

The two girls and their host took their coffee on the verandah. They were all rather silent as though the great round face that beamed down on them had laid a hushing finger on its lips. Out of the silvered darkness all around arose the distant barking of the village dogs and from time to time they heard a dismal, shuddering howl.

'Jackal,' said Colin as the plaintive baying reached their ears. 'It's the cry of Anubis, guardian of the burial-grounds.'

Once more the wailing call rang out and, echoing, died away.

'Colin,' Molly proposed suddenly, stamping out her cigarette upon the concrete floor, 'let's climb that hill opposite. The view in the moonlight must be ripping.'

'Rather!' the boy agreed enthusiastically and jumped up. 'Come along, Mrs. Averil!'

But, smiling understandingly, Jean shook her head. They were young and in love; and so soon to be parted.

'Wild horses wouldn't drag me out!' she declared. 'You run along and look at your old moon. I'll be all right here!'

Colin glanced backward into the living-room, now plunged in darkness.

'The whisky and the cigarettes are on the table behind you,' he said. 'I'm afraid Mohammed has gone to bed. He sleeps over there' — he pointed out into the moonlight — 'behind the kitchen. Would you like me to light the lamp?'

'Not at all,' Jean protested. 'The moon makes it as bright as day. Run along and play, children, but don't go too far!'

'We shall only be on the hill across the valley,' Colin told her. 'If you sing out, we shall hear you. We'll be back presently. So long!'

'So long, Jean darling!' echoed Molly, tucking her arm through Colin's.

'So long!' cried Jean and the lovers ran laughing down the hill among the moonbeams. At the bottom they paused to wave their hands and then the shadows gathered them up.

Jean sighed and raised her eyes to the moon. The air was warm, the night exquisite. How the dogs barked! But their faint persistent clamour did not break the peace of the night. How world-remote this valley! The roar of cities seemed but the echo of a dream. The midnight glare of Broadway, Paris and its deafening din — these were of another planet.

How still it was! Colin and Molly had gone and left no sound, vanished utterly among the shadows as though the moon — what was the old myth? — had devoured them. Jean felt like the last woman in the world. So, she told herself, that remote descendant of hers might one day sit and look up at the moon, the last survivor of her race . . .

Out of the ring of darkness a jackal howled again. Guardian of the burial-grounds, Colin had called it. Millions upon millions of dead, someone had told her, lay buried in the fastnesses of these Theban hills. She thought of them now, lying all about her, sheeted and bound, with hollow eyes and wide grim mouths, arms crossed on breast, an untold host, sleeping in the bosom of the rock, century after century, waiting for the trumpet of the Judgment Day to ring echoing through the ageless valley . . .

She shuddered at the vision. How long the children were away! Behind her the house was black, black . . . Again that doleful howl from the night.

Something rustled close at hand and her heart seemed to stand still. A stealthy footfall had sounded on the concrete floor. Without turning her head, she knew that someone had stepped out upon the verandah.

She looked up, her eyes wide with alarm.

Standing at her elbow was a tall white form.

CHAPTER XVI

THE MAN WHO SOUGHT A FRIEND

The moon lit up the face, alert and fierce with bright eyes peering boldly out from under the white turban. To her, as to other Europeans fresh to the East, most natives looked alike. But these features, with their air of indomitable energy most uncommon in the Egyptian, had stamped themselves upon her memory. It was the face of the man she had seen in the passage by the mosque, the native who had leapt the wall on the heels of the bearer of the statuette.

Affrighted, she had half-risen from her chair when a deep voice said quietly in English:

'It's Mrs. Averil, isn't it?'

She glanced about her. Save for the native, the verandah was empty.

'I'm afraid I frightened you. I'm sorry: I'd no idea there was anybody here but Colin . . .'

The native was speaking. He had doffed his turban. A head of crisp black hair emerged. With the headdress gone, the disguise fell away like a cloak discarded. It was Cradock's voice speaking, Cradock's blue eyes that looked at her out of the brown face.

With a little gasp she sank back in her chair.

'Oh,' she sighed, 'I didn't know who it was. Mr. Beck said you were in Cairo . . .'

'I meant to go; but I had to postpone my departure. I've got a job o' work to do on the *Gebel* to-night. As it's likely to keep me out till morning, and it gets

chilly towards dawn, I thought I'd fetch a flask. One grows used to wearing native dress, you know, and when I saw you sitting here on the verandah I'm afraid it never occurred to me that my appearance might be frightening. I must have scared you awfully. Please let me apologise . . .'

'It's all right,' she murmured, embarrassed. She was thinking of their last meeting and the memory troubled her.

'I didn't know you were a friend of Colin's,' he remarked, sitting down on the top step of the verandah. She caught the enquiring note in his voice.

'Molly Dalton, Mr. Beck's fiancée, brought me along,' she answered. 'She wanted to see the moonlight on the hills.'

'Somehow I don't see you as a chaperon!' he said, gazing up at her with an amused expression.

That broke the ice. She laughed. 'I'm a most inefficient one,' she retorted. 'They went off after dinner to climb that hill opposite. That was more than half an hour ago and they're not back yet.'

He smiled up at her from his perch on the steps. 'Then you won't mind my sitting here a bit to keep you company?'

'Of course not. It's your house, isn't it? I believe I've got your room. Didn't Colin tell you?'

He shook his head. 'I expect he didn't dare.'

She had been steeling herself to say to him what she knew she must say. His half-joking words gave her the opening. She did not hesitate on the brink. She plunged right in.

'Mr. Cradock,' she said, 'I want to tell you something . . .'

He turned his head quickly. She felt his eyes on her face. She knew he had grasped her meaning. But she did not look at him. She was gazing fixedly out over the valley flooded with silver light.

'Mrs. Averil, please . . .'

'No,' she said, 'let me finish. On the ship you . . . you made me angry and I believed a cruel story that someone told me about you . . .'

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I've long since got over caring what people say . . .'

'I shouldn't have judged you,' she persisted. 'But . . . but . . . you were hateful about the cabin . . . and other things. And I guess you wounded my *amour-propre*. So . . . so I was ready to believe the worst of you. Women are like that, you know. And I said something to you that I shouldn't have said. Afterwards I met a friend of yours in Cairo and he told me the truth . . .'

'John Bastable ought to mind his own business!' grumbled the man.

'No, he was quite right. He made me realise how badly I had behaved.'

She glanced down at him shyly. His eyes rested hungrily on her face. 'Will you forgive me?' she said.

He looked out across the valley. 'There's nothing to forgive,' he answered gently. 'I guessed that someone had been running me down to you.' He paused. 'I hoped one day to tell you the true story myself.'

'But,' she exclaimed, 'how did you know that we should ever meet again?'

Through her mind there flashed, half-formed, the thought of danger. This was man, the enemy. Already a bond of sympathy had formed between them; and

in his voice there seemed to be a note that should warn her to double the sentinels over her heart. But she let the thought slip by. The splendour of the night made her reckless. She was glad to sit there under the moon and, while she warmed her frozen heart at the fire of their mutual attraction, watch the cold reserve of this strange and lonely man thaw and melt away.

Hugging his knees under his white linen robe and staring straight in front of him, he answered her.

'Some things in my life,' he said, 'I've always known would happen. I had a friend once — you know whom I mean; well, from the very start I felt that our friendship was ill-fated. But Destiny is a cruel master. Even when, out of sheer malice, he gives us a peep into the future, he won't let us out of his clutches. And so, although I knew that this . . . this friendship would bring me to sorrow and disaster, I would not give it up . . .' he sighed, 'until I had to . . .'

His voice trailed off into silence. Above the restless baying of the village curs, the howl of the jackal went wailing among the hills.

'That first night I met you, when you stumbled on the deck . . . there was a band on shore playing that thing of Raquel Meller's; I heard it again one evening in Cairo, and it brought the whole scene back to me . . . when I saw your face as you raised your eyes to mine, I read in the future as clearly as though someone had written it above the lights of Monte Carlo, in letters of fire in the sky, that our paths would cross again. And when later you came to my cabin, I could hardly believe my eyes, for, though we may sometimes think to pierce the mists that lie across the course of our lives, Fate is jealous and never gives us certainty . . .'

He shifted his position and faced her. His gaze was level, the eyes grave and rather sad. The fleeting fear lest he might press the advantage of the intimacy that the night had established between them flickered in her heart and died. A little restless feeling took its place. Was it disappointment . . .?

'I, too, have something to tell you,' his deep voice resumed. 'I was a churl about changing cabins, a boor when you sought to make friends, a fool, a madman, when I suspected you . . .'

'You really thought I was ransacking your cabin?' she asked.

'Only for a moment. There were reasons . . . but let that pass. At first, when you claimed that cabin, I thought you were just a spoiled woman and . . . and . . . well, I suppose it amused me to make you ask as a favour what you began by demanding as a right. No, don't be angry yet . . . just hear me out to the end! When on deck next day you came up to me, so kindly, so candidly, to put things right, I turned and fled from you . . . because I was afraid!'

'Afraid?' she repeated in wonder. 'Afraid of me? But why?'

He bent his head, staring down at his thin hands.

'Because . . . ' He hesitated. 'Years ago,' he said, 'I gave a woman all that a man can give, his heart, his honour. She threw them both away, and since that day I've never had a woman for a friend . . .' He spoke evenly, without warmth or false pathos, impersonally as one tells a child a story. 'That night you came on board the Aquatic and I caught you in my arms, though it was only a glimpse I had of your face under the electric light, I knew that I could make a friend of you . . .'

At that she was on her guard. It was the classic opening of the philanderer. He was going to make love to her. Men were all alike . . .

'There's something in your eyes,' the steady voice went on, 'that . . . I don't know how to put it! You somehow look as if you wouldn't let a fellow down. Often, in the years I've spent alone in this little shack, I've sat and smoked my pipe at night on the verandah here and wondered whether anywhere in the world there was a woman I could trust as I'd trust dear old Lomax or John Bastable. But when I thought I'd met her, I ran away. Fear is the father of hate, you know, and because I was afraid of you, there were times when I almost loathed you for upsetting all my principles . . .'

'Anyway,' she broke in coldly, 'you're not afraid of me now . . .'

He was quick to notice the change in her tone.

'I only told you this,' he said in an altered voice, 'to excuse . . . no, to explain my abominable bad manners!'

'Please don't say anything more about it,' she begged formally. 'I'm sure we're going to be very good friends!'

He leant back on his hands, stretching his long legs on the verandah before him.

'Ships that pass in the night!' he said sombrely.

There came a hail from the darkness below.

'Jee-an!'

Jean got up from her chair and Cradock scrambled to his feet. With a flutter of white skirt, Molly came panting up the path.

'My dear,' she exclaimed. 'It's all my fault. It was so exquisite up there on the mountain that I wouldn't let Colin come in. Oh . . . why, it's Mr. Cradock!

What a start you gave me in those weird clothes! I thought you'd gone to Cairo!'

'Hullo, Dave!' Collin spoke from the foot of the steps. 'Where did you spring from? You'll have to sleep on the table. Mrs. Averil's got your bed!'

'It's all right,' rejoined Cradock. 'I'm not stopping, Colin. Mrs. Averil and I have been keeping each other company.'

'I say' — Colin came up the steps — 'what about this statuette of Anubis, Dave?'

Suddenly Cradock's face was very stern in the moonlight.

'What statuette?' he demanded.

Colin looked blankly at Jean.

'Haven't you told him?' he asked her.

Cradock's eyes were fixed on her face.

'Really,' she said calmly, 'Mr. Cradock was so interesting about himself that I forgot all about it.'

She saw him wilt at that; but she felt no remorse.

'I'll fetch it,' cried Colin, and vanished into the house.

He returned in an instant and placed the little figure in Cradock's hands.

'Where did you get this, Mrs. Averil?'

The question was brusque; his tone business-like.

'In the passage by the mosque in the Luxor Temple,' she answered. 'A man sprang over the wall and pushed it into my hands. He rushed away, and then another man appeared. Now I know that the second man was you!'

'You, Dave?' exclaimed Colin.

'Go on, please,' said Cradock to Jean.

'I was frightened and I hid in the passage,' she

resumed, 'and you went away. Then I returned to the hotel. That's all!'

'Which way did this man, the man with the statuette, go, when he left you?' Cradock demanded.

'Down the lane that leads to that street of shops. I couldn't see his face . . .'

'That doesn't matter. Did you see anyone else hanging about the passage?'

'No,' Jean answered. 'Stop,' she said. 'As I was coming away I ran into a man I know . . .'

'Yes?' from Cradock eagerly.

'Mr. Simonou! You know him, too, I think. He was on the boat . . .'

'Simonou,' observed Cradock. 'Simonou, eh? Ah, yes!'

There was a moment's silence. He took a turn up and down the verandah while the others watched him.

'Mrs. Averil,' he said presently, stopping in front of Jean, 'I'm going to ask you to do us a favour. Would you mind leaving this figure in our charge for a bit? . . .'

'Why, sure,' Jean replied, rather mystified. 'I don't regard it as my property, you know . . .'

'Quite, quite,' Cradock rejoined absently. He picked up the little figure and carried it into the living-room where Colin had lit the lamp, the others following behind. With his free hand he cleared a little space on the shelf among the antikas. He set down the image and stood back to contemplate it.

'What do you say, Colin?' he said. 'Don't you think it adds a bit of tone to the room, eh, what?'

'You don't propose to leave it there, do you, Dave?'

'Why not? Don't you think it looks nice? Or would you prefer it on the table?'

'Don't be such an ass! You know there's only one place in this country for anything as valuable as that figure and that's the safe!'

'That reminds me,' Cradock observed. 'You've got my key, haven't you?'

Colin handed it over. Cradock stepped across to the safe, slammed the door, and locked it. Then he tucked the key away in his belt.

'You don't mean to say that you're going to leave the statuette where it is?' demanded Colin.

'Pooh,' his friend retorted, 'it'll be all right till morning . . .' He glanced round the room. 'Mohammed gone to bed?'

'Hours ago,' said Colin. 'It's nearly twelve o'clock . . .'

'Then I must be off,' announced Cradock. 'Good-night, everybody . . .'

'Look here, Dave . . .' cried Colin.

But Cradock had slipped out across the verandah and vanished into the night.

CHAPTER XVII

THE KNIFE AT THE SHUTTER

After Cradock had gone, Colin pointed to the whisky and siphon with an interrogative gesture.

'No takers?' he said. 'Then I will!'

He mixed himself a drink and drained it at a gulp.

'What an extraordinary creature!' Molly remarked, putting into words the thought that was in the minds of all. 'Where's he off to now, do you suppose, Colin?'

'The Lord knows!' retorted the youth curtly. His placid face was troubled and he seemed rather put out.

'But where's he going to sleep?' asked Jean.

'That also is hidden from us,' replied Colin. 'But then Dave doesn't seem to need sleep like other people!'

'You never asked him if the statuette *was* stolen,' Molly put in reproachfully.

'It obviously is,' Colin rejoined rather heatedly. 'And Dave's after the thieves. That's what he's doing night after night on the *Gebel*. But this . . .' He looked fixedly at the little figure perched on the shelf, then walked over to the table and, without finishing his sentence, helped himself to another drink.

'What about bed?' he asked, putting down the empty glass.

'It sounds all right to me,' said Jean. 'Me too,' Molly hastened to add. The young man lit two candles that stood on a side table and gave one to each of the girls.

'Don't open the windows until you've put the light out,' he cautioned them, 'or you'll get all sorts of wild

life buzzing in. And I think I should keep the shutters bolted.'

'Heavens!' the two girls protested in chorus, 'we shall stifle . . . !'

'All the same I think it's wiser,' Colin remarked, 'you know, on account of wild cats and things!' He opened the passage door.

'Good-night, Mrs. Averil,' he said. 'I hope you'll sleep well.' He put an arm about Molly as she followed Jean through the door and kissed the top of her silky golden head. 'Good-night, darling!' Impulsively she flung her arms round him and pressed her lips to his.

'Colin, dear, it's been lovely!' she whispered.

'Ouch!' he cried as a trickle of hot wax from her wildly waving candle took him down the back of the neck. Laughing, she broke away and, darting down the corridor, kissed her hand to him as she vanished into her room. He shut the passage door and silence fell upon the bungalow.

His pyjamas and slippers lay beneath the pillows of the big divan. He prepared his bed by piling up the cushions at one end and dragging out a blanket from underneath. Then he slipped out of his clothes and in his thin silk pyjamas, his red hair tousled, a cigarette between his lips, drifted about the room putting things to rights. He set a candle and the matches on a small table handy to the divan, shut and bolted the verandah door across the wire screen and opened the windows on either side. Then he blew out the lamp.

A gleam of broken moonlight filtering through the window screens touched the yellow image on the shelf among the antiquities. On his noiseless way across to his bed, Colin stopped before the statuette and

regarded it silently. Then with a wag of the head he sat down on the edge of the divan and kicked off his slippers.

'What the devil he's up to,' he muttered to himself, 'the Lord only knows! And such a cautious devil as he is!'

A sudden idea seemed to strike the youth. He got up and padded across the matting to a desk. From a drawer he took an automatic pistol. His fingers felt for the catch, released the magazine, weighed it, and snicked it back into position. Then he tiptoed back to the divan, slipped the weapon under the pillow, and crept under the blanket. He lay still for a little while, attuning his ear to the silence that rested over the house. The night was peaceful now: even the dogs had ceased to bark. He sighed once or twice, turned over, and sank into the happy sleep of weary, care-free youth . . .

'Now I wonder,' Jean was thinking to herself as she lay in bed on the other side of the wall, contemplating the tentlike canopy of mosquito-curtain, 'I wonder why Dave told me all that to-night.' She called him 'Dave' to herself: her mind dwelt fondly on the diminutive. It was plain, it was sensible, it was — well — kind of reliable . . . just Dave! If he had meant to make love to her — and she was now less decided on this point — the intention was only revealed in his words. To be fair to him, there had been nothing in his manner to suggest it. Perhaps he had been speaking the truth; perhaps he had really felt attracted to her that night on the steamer. She remembered now how tightly he had held her during that instant in which she had rested in his arms. It had left her a little breathless,

too. She had read of such things in books. But in real life? She laughed to herself incredulously. Love at first sight? Oh, no! It was like the stuff that some married men talked, about being 'misunderstood' at home. She had met the type before . . .

Still he was an unusual person, was Dave. He hadn't put himself out in the least to be nice to her. He had talked to her . . . well, just as if she'd been a man. She had looked like a woman, he'd told her, 'who wouldn't let a fellow down.' That description would surely fit Dave, too. He'd be a wonderful friend . . . for a man. He wouldn't give his friendship lightly either. How self-contained he was! When you looked into those blue eyes of his, you seemed to be gazing down an endless vista without ever coming to the man underneath.

She found herself comparing him with the only other man in Egypt who interested her — Prince Said Hussein. They were both reserved in their own way: both had that air of knowing what they wanted and of meaning to have it. But the Prince was a man who wanted you to like him: Dave didn't seem to care a damn whether you did or not . .

Still her conscience was pricking her a little. She had been rather horrid to Dave again. She hadn't meant to be; but he was getting on dangerously intimate ground and she was through with men . . . anyway, with men who talked about your eyes. Dave would be round again in the morning — they'd have to decide what to do with the statuette. Perhaps she would be nice to him . . . perhaps. In any case she was not likely to see much more of him, for she was catching the night train to Cairo to-morrow . . .

How quiet the house was! The ticking of her wrist-watch on the table beside the bed was clearly audible. A little wind seemed to have got up outside; she could hear the shutter creak. What a nuisance to have to keep it bolted! She would have liked to lie in bed and gaze up at the tremendous cliffs, as she had seen them from the window, towering up in the moonlight . . .

How the shutter rattled . . . She started up. What was the scraping noise at the window? Heavens, suppose it was one of these wild cats! Hurriedly she swept aside the mosquito netting. In a scratchy ball it brushed her face as she peered out. The scraping sound persisted, soft and regular, and in the greyish light that slanted upward through the slats she thought she saw the shutter move.

She scrambled hastily out of bed. Her instinct was to close the window and shut out that scratching, scraping thing. But even as, in her bare feet, she advanced across the floor she saw, wedged between the two leaves of the shutters, the blade of a long and gleaming knife. And it was feeling, softly and steadily, upward for the flat iron bar that ran across the inside of the shutters.

At that her nerve failed her and, hands clasped to her cheeks, she cried out. Even as she called, with a crash, the shutters fell apart. On the window sill without, in inky silhouette against the silvery light beyond, the stocky figure of a native stood, a knife shining in one great black hand.

She screamed and screamed again; but even as that burly menacing form sprang forward to leap into the room, an anguished yell rang out from the window and the black shape sprawled head downward over the embrasure.

There came a furious beating on the door and Colin's voice crying out in alarm: 'What's the matter? What is it?' With a feeling of panic, Jean remembered that she had locked herself in. At the window the native was struggling like a wild beast in the grip of a tall figure in white that now knelt upon the sill. Even as she sprang to shoot back the bolt of the door the struggling pair crashed over into the room, biting and kicking and growling, with short, panting breaths as they rolled on the matting. They were fighting for possession of the long knife that still gleamed in the great black hand.

Colin burst like a whirlwind into the room, brandishing a pistol. A voice spoke, breathless but calm: 'Don't shoot, old boy. The knife! Stamp on his wrist! That's it!'

Something rattled on the floor: a guttural command in Arabic: and the struggle ceased. The tall figure stood up. It was Cradock. His turban was gone, his white robe was split across the chest and from head to foot he was smeared with dust and blood. But his eyes were shining like stars. In the moonlight that poured in through the open window — for the screen had disappeared — his opponent lay propped listless against the wall. Colin stood over him with the automatic. The native's turban had fallen off and his blouse was torn to tatters. Under his rags his great chest heaved up and down and the breath hissed through his lips. Out of his single eye, for the socket of the other was red and empty, he glared defiance at Colin who stood over him with the automatic.

And then Colin suddenly thrust his pistol into Cradock's hand. 'The statuette . . .' he cried and darted

from the room. Jean, huddled in the eiderdown she had snatched from the bed, and Molly, whom the outcry had aroused from sleep, in her dressing-gown followed him. The doors onto the verandah were wide open. The place on the shelf where the figure of Anubis had crouched among the other curios was empty.

Colin dashed back to the bedroom.

'It's gone!' he cried excitedly. Cradock was puffing at his pipe. He showed no sign of emotion.

'Is that so?' he said.

'But, man alive, what are you going to do about it?'

'Do?' was the calm answer. 'Why, nothing!'

'But, Dave . . .'

Cradock did not seem to hear him. He had turned to Jean. 'You must have had a fright,' he said. 'It wasn't my fault this time. I thought there might be something. But I didn't foresee — *this*.'

'It seems to me that you saved my life,' Jean replied in a low voice.

'It wasn't you. It was me he was after!' Cradock retorted carelessly. But Jean cried out. 'Oh, your hand!' she exclaimed.

Cradock stuck out his right hand to which she pointed and regarded it whimsically. The back was a mass of blood. 'That's nothing,' he answered. 'He caught me a scrape with his sticker in the general scrimmage. It's only broken the skin, really. No, please, I'll attend to it myself when I have time . . .'

Firmly he put his hand behind his back and smiled at Jean as she stood with her hands on the water-jug and basin.

'Our friend here,' he added, pointing a contemptuous foot at the prone native, 'had a private score to settle

with me. He's my *rais*, the headman of my diggers. I had to tick him off to-day and it made him sore . . .'

Rather timorously Jean stared down at the black and sullen face. Now she remembered the one-eyed man she had seen with Simonou on the canal bank, the butt of Cradock's invective at the excavations.

'But,' she said, looking up at Cradock, 'I've seen this man before. He was talking to Mr. Simonou on the canal-bank yesterday morning!'

'What time was this?'

'Oh, quite early. About nine o'clock.'

Cradock turned aside, his face sombre. Then Colin chipped in.

'Look here, Dave,' he said, 'we'd better send Mohammed down to Luxor for the police . . .'

Cradock looked across at him. His face was rather truculent.

'No,' he said curtly. 'I'll have no police butting in between me and my men. I'll attend to this fellow myself . . .'

'But, Dave, you'll land yourself in all sorts of trouble!'

Cradock shrugged his shoulders. 'I'll take my chance of that,' he said. 'No Gyppie's going to draw a knife on me and get away with it. Besides, he frightened Mrs. Averil . . .'

'No, no,' Jean begged nervously, 'let the man go . . .'

Cradock's face was like iron. 'Please leave this to me!' he said. His voice was inflexible. He held the pistol out to Colin. 'Your gun!'

Silently the boy received the weapon. Cradock crossed to the wall and took down a riding-crop that hung beneath the head of an ibex. He touched the sprawling figure of the native with his toe. '*Yallah!*'

(Get on!) he growled. Stolidly the man rose to his feet. He was clearly cowed. Nervously his single eye travelled from Cradock's face to the ugly-looking whip that the Englishman grasped. Without another word Cradock gripped him by the back of his *gallibiyeh* and ran him out of the room.

'Is . . . is he going to beat him, Colin?' asked Molly in an awed voice.

The boy did not answer the question directly. 'It's no use talking to him,' he said. 'He knows how to handle these people. Anyway, Ali would rather take a hiding from Dave than be handed over to the tender mercies of the Gyppie police. But hadn't you two better be getting back to bed?'

Jean shivered under her eiderdown. 'I'm going to sleep with you, Molly. Do you mind?'

'Of course not, darling. Come along!'

As they crossed the corridor they heard from the back of the house a succession of sharp cracks mingled with piteous howls. They hurried into the bedroom and closed the door to shut out the distressing sounds . . .

CHAPTER XVIII

THE VIGIL

They slept until eight o'clock. There was no sign of Cradock when they came in to breakfast an hour later. Nor had Colin seen anything of him. Then the donkeys were brought to the foot of the path and they rode slowly down to Luxor through the glittering morning. Colin, who was copying mural reliefs in one of the Tombs of the Nobles at Sheikh Abd'ul Qurna, parted from them at the Ramesseum to go to his work. But he promised to come down to Luxor later in the afternoon to see Jean off to Cairo.

It wanted a quarter of an hour before the time for the long white train to pull out when his scarlet poll flamed like a panache in battle, above the heads of the swarming mob on the platform. Jean had insisted on Simmons sharing a sleeping-compartment with her, and had sent the maid to bed while she returned to the platform to chat with Molly. Colin carried the two girls along to the dining-car for a drink before the train started. 'I've something to tell you,' he explained. 'It's quiet there and we can talk!'

'Look here,' he said when they were seated at one of the little glass-covered tables, 'I've not seen Dave again. But I've had a word with Mohammed. I believe that old Dave *meant* that statuette to be stolen. Mohammed tells me that he was aroused last night by men prowling round the house. There were two of them, one at the front and one at the back. He was returning

to the kitchen to alarm the men sleeping there when Dave suddenly appeared. He ordered Mohammed to take one of his pals and to keep an eye on the chap watching the front, but on no account to interfere with him unless Dave whistled. Dave slunk round to the back and grabbed Ali by the foot just as he'd got the shutters open. Directly the shindy started at the back, Mohammed says, the fellow in front sprang up the stairs to the verandah, whipped the door open in some extraordinary fashion — I locked it before I went to bed, but the bar is pretty loose — dodged into the house and was out again in a flash. Hullo, here are the drinks. Chin chin! . . .'

They sipped their cocktails and, lighting a cigarette, he resumed.

'It's quite obvious to me,' he said, 'that these chaps didn't know that you and Molly were sleeping in Dave's room and mine. Dave, who's got eyes like a cat's in the dark, must have spotted this ruffian Ali prowling about at the back and guessed what the idea was. What Ali apparently intended was to settle old Dave, and then to polish me off. Even if Dave had woken up and there'd been a fight, the effect would have been the same, for I should have rushed to Dave's room and the front of the house would have been clear.'

'But why should Mr. Cradock have wanted to have the statuette stolen?' Jean asked.

'Well,' Colin answered reflectively, 'there's been a lot of pilfering on the digs lately. Everybody's complaining. Though how, if this statuette was pinched from one of the excavations, Dave can say positively that it is stolen beats me. For in that case obviously the only person who knows of its existence is the fellow

that found it and pocketed it instead of turning it in. If any of the foreign diggers, the French say, or the Yanks, had discovered a statuette as unique in its way as this one is, I might not necessarily have heard about it. Usually we keep these things quiet until the find has been officially notified. But if it had been stolen *after* it had been in the excavators' hands, I should certainly have heard. Why, the whole *Gebel* would have buzzed with it!'

'But if Mr. Cradock knew that the figure had been stolen surely he would have locked it up in the safe as you suggested, Colin?' said Molly.

'Not if he wanted to trace the receiver. Usually these native pilferers thieve on their own account. But they've been so enterprising lately that some of us believe there's a big organisation behind them. It's obviously more important to find out what eventually becomes of the statuette than to arrest the wretched devil who gets a few piastres for pinching it. But this is the business of the Department of Antiquities. I don't know what it's got to do with Dave . . . good Lord, she's off! . . . Molly!'

The train had begun to move. Colin grabbed Molly by the arm and rushed to the carriage door. They tumbled out upon the platform and stood there waving to Jean who fluttered her hand from the window. Slowly the long train, with its dust-boards and shuttered harem coaches, thumped by. At the door of one of the sleepers in the rear a man leaned out, looking towards the end of the platform. As his coach glided past Colin, the boy started and nudged the girl at his side.

'Simonou!' he said.

Though it lies within a minute's walk of the terrace of Shepheard's, hibernants in Egypt will scarcely know the Hôtel Delphos in Cairo. A cracked and grimy gas-lamp, bearing in peeling black letters across its face that word of elastic interpretation 'HÔTEL,' marks its narrow and cavernous entrance beneath the arcades of the Boulevard Clot Bey.

It is one of a rookery of mean lodging-houses that nest, like a colony of carrion crows, under the arches of Cairo's noisiest and dirtiest thoroughfare. Behind it, day and night, the wide-open doors of the ill-reputed Wagh-el-Birket offer the hospitality of uninviting lupanaria where, after the fall of darkness, pianos tinkle incessantly, painted European women call softly from balconies, and shadows flit mysteriously up and down the greasy staircases. Not a biscuit-throw away the signs of the Military Government of Cairo 'OUT OF BOUNDS TO TROOPS,' slung across the narrow, lamp-lit lanes, guard the approaches to that maze of native infamy, the Fish-Market.

Night had dropped down over the Boulevard Clot Bey bringing with it a smother of cold rain and a knife-edge wind that swept the dust along the arcades. An hour ago the filthy negro who, in a cap of tarnished lace, acted as porter, boots, chambermaid, bully, and general factotum to Mr. Xenophon Anthropophagos, proprietor of the Hôtel Delphos, had lighted the lamp and retired to his twilight den overlooking the stairs. There was a pigeon-hole in the door at which payment was demanded of clients as they entered and a key proffered in exchange.

Presently a step sounded in the narrow passage from the street. The porter pushed his shining black face

out of the trap. The glimmer of the oil-lamp that smoked on its nail halfway up the stairs showed a figure in European dress.

'El Hagg Yusui Ben Osman?' the stranger demanded.

'Number fourteen,' replied the black in Arabic, and his head bobbed back like an ebony cuckoo returning to its clock. The stranger passed on and mounted the flight before him. It turned and brought him to a landing from which a small and stuffy passage ran right and left. It was quite dark and he had to strike a match to read the numbers on the doors. At last he stopped, dropped his match, stamping it underfoot, and knocked.

A light movement was audible within the room. The door opened a few inches. Then a hand clutched his and he was drawn inside. A tall Arab bolted the door behind them, and, turning, faced the newcomer, a finger on his lips.

The room was an abject hovel. It had a rusty bed covered with a dirty blanket that incompletely concealed a yet dirtier sheet and pillow. Along the crumbling plaster of the wall on a level with the bed an even row of reddish stains denoted the untimely end of mosquitoes and other less mentionable insects which had certainly not paid their admission at the pigeonhole below. The remainder of the furniture was of a summary description and all in a state of disrepair. On one side was a closed door communicating with the adjoining room. A candle, shaded by a newspaper propped against a chair, stood in a basin on the ground by the bed.

'Sorry to have had to bring you here, John,' the Arab said in English in a voice that was like a muted whisper. 'My man's gone to earth. He's in the next

room and he's got the goods with him. If you look through that hole in the door, you can see him. Easy now!'

The newcomer doffed the tweed cap he had been wearing with the peak pulled down over the eyes and disclosed the grizzled head of John Villiers Bastable, C.M.G. Halfway down the communicating door was a little tab of cardboard held in position by a drawing-pin. Bastable knelt down, swung the card aside and applied his eye to a hole that had been freshly bored in the wood.

In the next room a man sat writing at a table. The table was littered with papers and his watch was propped up against the inkstand. Every time he stopped writing, he seemed to consult it. He had a sleek black head that shone in the light of an oil-lamp that burned at his elbow and when, moving his hand to turn the page, he disclosed his face, Bastable saw that it was of a yellow tinge with black restless eyes. Anyone who had lived in Egypt as long as John Villiers Bastable would have recognised without possibility of error the characteristic facial tint, if not the features, of Simonou the Greek.

Bastable dropped the shield over the hole and stood up. The Arab beckoned him over to the farthest corner of the room.

'Sit down!' he whispered, pointing at the bed. Bastable glanced dubiously at the wall with its thin red line eloquent of past battles and shook his head. 'I think the floor would be safer, Dave,' he said and squatted. 'Your get-up's A1, old boy,' he added. 'I'd never have known you!'

'I hope that Simonou won't,' said Cradock. 'I

quite realise that I'm up against a fellow who knows me and knows me well and who is a devilish sharp customer into the bargain. John, old man, I've been at that hole in the door since we got in here from Luxor at nine o'clock this morning. One of your fellows who showed himself at the station in Cairo frightened our little friend and he's lain low all day. But he'll go out to-night. I swear he'll go out to-night . . .'

'He seems to be watching the clock in there,' Bastable observed.

Cradock nodded. 'I had the same impression. It looks to me as if he has an appointment!'

'And you're sure that he's got the statuette with him?'

'Yes. I watched him unpack it from his suitcase this morning and wrap it in a silk cloth, ready to take away to-night, I suppose. Hist! . . . Did you hear anything just now?'

The two men stared at each other, listening. But the only sound was the clanging bells of the trams as they thumped past in the street outside and beyond that the faint bourdon of the city. Cradock, who had been leaning against the bedpost, stole across the room and stooped to his Judas-hole.

He tiptoed back and made a reassuring gesture. 'All serene!' was his report. 'He's still busy writing . . .'

He sat down on the ragged matting opposite his friend with the shielded candle between them.

'I've tracked that damned statuette step by step from Deir el-Bahari to this house,' he said. 'I devilish near lost it altogether; — but let me tell you about it. Ali pinched it. He's my *rais*, you know. I told you I had my doubts about the scoundrel. I shadowed him

down to Qurna that afternoon and watched him slip the figure to a party called Shadly who lives in the village — his wife's brother, I believe he is. This Shadly apparently had orders to hand the statuette over after dark to someone who would meet him in the passage by the little mosque in the Luxor Temple. Trust a Gyppo to botch any arrangement in which there's a time-table. I was hard on Shadly's heels at the time: perhaps he spotted me and got flurried. Anyway, he handed the statuette over to the European who chanced to be in the passage at the time . . .'

'To Simonou?'

'This European was in breeches and boots and, as the light was none too good, Shadly probably thought it *was* Simonou. But it wasn't a man at all. It was Mrs. Averil!'

Bastable pursed up his lips as though to emit a whistle of astonishment. But no sound came. Cradock's deep whisper ran on:

'I was as sick as mud as you can imagine; for it looked as though our whole scheme were a wash-out. But then, as I wrote you in my note this morning, the figure came back into my hands through Mrs. Averil and I hit on the plan of letting them steal it back from me. You see, I had spotted this fellow Shadly hanging about the house on the *Gebel* earlier in the evening . . .'

'But how did they know that you had it?'

'They didn't. But that's where Simonou's diabolical ingenuity comes in. He found out that Ali had a grudge against me: I'd told the black rascal off that morning for working a boy that was lame; and they filled him up with mastic and persuaded him to try and knife me that night. Simonou, of course, doesn't care a tinker's

curse about Ali and his grievance, though I dare say he wouldn't mind seeing me out of the way. But he spotted a golden opportunity of using this diversion of Ali's to break into my place from the front to see if the statuette was there. They may have found out that Shadly was followed that night and suspected me.

'As we know, the statuette *was* there. Shadly carried it off and, when it was growing light — no native will face the road down to Luxor in the dark — he came down to Simonou's *dahibeah* with the swag. I know, because' — his brown face wrinkled up in a silent chuckle — 'I was there at the riverside waiting for him!'

His eyes sparkled and his whispering voice rose on a harsh note of exultation. But his face was weary and even his smile failed to mask its strained and overwrought expression. Bastable remarked it and said gently:

'Dave, old boy, you've done wonders. But you're nearer the breaking-point than you think. It's plain sailing now. Let my men take over: I've got a brace outside; and you get some rest . . .'

Cradock stopped him with an angry shake of the head. Squatting cross-legged on the ground, with his green turban of the Mecca pilgrimage and his dusky skin, he had the air of a pasha ordering a slave to instant execution.

'This is my show, John,' he retorted. 'I hand over when I have discovered the ultimate destination of that statuette, and not before. Damn him!' he exclaimed under his breath irascibly and rose to his feet. 'Why the devil doesn't the fellow go out?'

He crept once more to the spy-hole. The house was strangely quiet. From the street below mounted the

harsh staccato bark of a car speeding on its way with the cut-out open after the merry fashion of Young Egypt. A tram crashed noisily over the points at the corner of the street. Somewhere down the boulevard an automatic piano began to jangle out an old German ditty that Bastable had not heard since his student days at Heidelberg:

'Trinken wir noch ein Tröpfchen,
Trinken wir noch ein Tröpfchen,
Aus dem kleinen Henkeltöpfchen . . .'

It brought back to his mind a sunlit garden under the vines by the Neckar with a brass band blaring and jolly girls flitting to and fro among the tables, their hands full of creaming pots of beer . . . *Eheu fugaces!* He sat and let those scenes of youth trip by.

Suddenly — how long had he been dreaming? — he roused himself. Cradock, from his observation post, was signing: 'The candle, the candle!' Bastable crushed the flame in his fingers and stood up. There was a moment's tremulous silence in the room. From outside the clamour of the street rose to their ears like a vast discordant shout.

Then a door creaked gently, there was the sound of a key being turned, a stealthy footfall in the corridor without. Cradock had stood up, an imposing figure in his high turban and long black robe.

His breath was hot in Bastable's ear in a whisper as soft as a sigh.

'Wait ten minutes!'

'My men . . . ?'

'This is my show!'

A pressure of the hand, a creak of the door, and he crept noiselessly away.

Long-drawn-out bugle notes, thrice-repeated, rang out faintly above the ceaseless murmur of the city. Bastable looked at his watch. It was ten-fifteen. Up at the Citadel they were blowing 'Lights Out.'

He sat down on the floor again to abide the appointed time.

CHAPTER XIX

SHEIKH ABDULLAH

HAVING seen Simmons comfortably installed in a private room in hospital, Jean arrived back at Shepheard's on the Sunday morning. She found Cairo more crowded than she had left it. The hotel lobby was like a station hall. The terrace, the pillared vestibule, and the round Moorish lounge with its low broad divans and dome of coloured glass rang with the accents of her fellow countrymen. Contemplating the throngs of tourists, she wondered vaguely why elderly American women wore knickerbockers when they came to Egypt. Some of the 'buds' looked charming in their neat 'plus fours' or smartly cut riding-breeches. But there are legs which the Creator surely intended to be hidden by skirts . . .

The tourist rush had set in. There was a queue of expostulants at the desk engaged in the futile task of trying to make the reception clerks lose their tempers, and the lotus columns in the front hall were placarded with sight-seeing tables for the great tourist cruises, terrifying documents with their dates and times, short and crisp and pitilessly business-like.

Shepheard's has a long memory for friends. Jean was given her old quiet bedroom and bath on the back surveying the garden. Nor had the management forgotten their weekly tribute to lonely ladies staying in the hotel, the Sunday nosegay. The chivalrous thought that had placed that bunch of carnations on her table

went far to ease the little pang she felt at her heart when she thought of Luxor and its golden sunshine. The sun at Cairo was pale and reluctant by comparison and on the terrace at Shepheard's they had rigged up the blue-and-white tenting across one side as shelter against the treacherous wind.

A note from the Prince awaited her. He was delighted that she could come to dinner, he wrote. He hoped she would not be disappointed with the fortune-teller. He had proved rather difficult, but he had definitely promised to come in after dinner. Madame Alexandrovna would fetch her at the hotel at half-past eight with the car.

Jean found herself looking forward to the party. The thought of the fortune-teller administered an agreeable thrill; and she liked being with the Prince. At least he didn't treat her like a man. The last time, it was true, he had been somewhat troublesome. But most men were apt to be like that; and when she had shown him that she did not care about promiscuous flirtation, he had desisted at once. After all, he was a gentleman. And Madame Alexandrovna would be there.

In a very happy frame of mind she opened a wardrobe trunk to consider the important question of a frock.

She was always late for her engagements: Mark used to tell her that all really nice women were a quarter of an hour slow; but Madame Alexandrovna had only just appeared when Jean descended to the hall. '*Ma chère,*' the Russian cried, taking Jean's cool hands in hers, 'Hussein rang me up while I was dressing and made me late. Have I kept you waiting?'

Beside Jean, demurely Anglo-Saxon with her grave

grey eyes and straight brown hair plainly dressed, lissom and fresh, with the scent of verbena and eau de cologne on her firm white skin emerging from her clinging frock of plain silver tissue under her old white Manila shawl, Nadia Alexandrovna had an almost Oriental appearance. Against that background of deferential, dark-skinned servants in tarbush or turban, it needed only a veil about the smooth satin sheen of her hair and a *burka* across the warm olive face below her greenly gleaming eyes to convert her into a very fair semblance of an Egyptian *mondaine*. She was draped from head to foot in a magnificent ermine wrap, white and smooth as driven snow, and pear-shaped emerald drops trembled at her ears. A fragrance of ambergris, like a breath from some seraglio, hung about her as a cloud.

Makhmoud, the Prince's body-servant, black and impassive, in his monkey-jacket and zouave trousers of royal scarlet, stood at the door of the Rolls-Royce. He bowed the two women into the car, then hopped up beside the driver and the limousine glided away from the kerb.

They crossed the Opera Square where stout old Ibrahim Pasha on his horse for ever points the way to victory and were presently engulfed in a labyrinth of small streets. Madame Alexandrovna chatted volubly.

'This poor Hussein,' she confided to Jean, 'has had all the trouble in the world with this *animal* of a fortune-teller. *Figurez-vous, ma chère,* at the last moment he refuses to leave the Arab quarter!'

'Oh,' cried Jean, quite crestfallen, 'do you mean to say, then, that Sheikh Abdullah is not coming?'

'Hussein isn't so easily beaten. "If the prophet

won't go to the mountain," he say, "the mountain, he go to the prophet!" We dine in the Arab quarter, *voilà tout!*'

'But how?'

'At the house of a friend of Hussein's who is from home. Abdullah will come there. It will be very interesting for you to see a Moslem *intérieur, hein?*'

Jean felt perplexed. The Arab quarter? It sounded very remote. She didn't know much about pretty little Madame Alexandrovna, either. But what could she do? She couldn't draw back now. Besides, she was so anxious to see the fortune-teller. The car went speeding on through the darkness.

'This Hussein, he is — how do you say it? — a scream,' Nadia rattled on. '*Imaginez-vous*, he wanted us to dine in the Arab fashion, doubled up on the floor about a little table, dipping with our hands in a dish. The Orient, I tell him, it is very good for a show to look at. But to live as the Oriental? *Ça jamais!* so we shall have asparagus and champagne in a setting *de tout ce qu'il y a du plus pur Pierre Loti.* It appears that the house of Osman el Maghraby, where we shall dine, is of the most curious. *Maintenant, recontez-moi!* Louqsor, how was it? Did you amuse yourself well?'

Jean sighed. 'It's an exquisite spot,' she said. 'I wish I had never left it.'

'Perhaps, *ma chère*, you made a conquest there that you regret?'

Jean laughed. 'I met only one new man at Luxor,' she said, 'and he was engaged.'

Nadia Alexandrovna shot her a probing glance out of her green eyes.

'The Prince is very *épris!*' she hazarded.

Jean laughed again. But the remark jarred on her.

'I expect it has happened to him very often before,' she rejoined. 'He knows altogether too much about women, it seems to me.'

'Ah, *pour ça*,' darkly remarked her companion, 'you are right, *ma chère!*'

Then they chatted about Luxor and its beauties until the stopping of the car put an end to their conversation. Makhmoud was bowing at the door. He spoke in Arabic to Madame Alexandrovna.

'We have arrived,' she said, turning to Jean. 'He wants us to follow him. It is a few *mètres* down the lane, he says!'

The car had halted in a little open space by a fountain hedged in on all sides by the flat dark shapes of houses. The chauffeur twisted a spot-lamp round and switched on a glaring beam of light. It fell on the opening of a narrow lane that ran between high mud walls.

A little rain spattered in their faces as the servant led them down the path of light. As they picked their steps along the lane, the jar of bolts reached their ears. At their left hand a glimmer fended the long mud wall. A heavy door, nail-studded, a small grille in its upper part, swung outwards, revealing a stone passage faintly lit by an old brass lantern. A janitor, salaaming low, faced them.

Behind him was the house-porter's seat with its cushion of Turkey red. The passage turned at right angles to the left and immediately bent again, blank, enigmatic. Then the door slammed with a thud that awoke the echoes of the lane and the two women, huddled in their wraps, were shut in with that curious, rather frightening odour that Jean had noticed in the

Luxor *souk* — a hot, slightly rancid, sweetish-sourish smell, like the emanation of an animal, beaten up, as it were, with some fugitive perfume, as of incense and orange-water blended, the faintly acrid fumes of burning wood in between. The atmosphere of the house, warm and secret, drifted to them over the hushed stillness of the passage, winding like a query mark.

Makhmoud shuffled ahead. The corridor brought them out upon an open court, a sort of pavilion at one end, sides free to the air, a fountain at the other. Galleries looked down upon it. In the far corner was a short flight of steps that ended in a curtained door.

As they mounted the steps, the curtain parted and the Prince appeared. Jean did not recognise him immediately, for he was in native dress with a striped red-and-white silken turban and a magnificent red-and-gold *kaftan* with wide sleeves. The concealment of his strange brindled hair altered his appearance remarkably. Its tawniness no longer corrected the purely Oriental cast of his features. The turban threw a shadow in his curious reddish eyes and emphasised the proud jut of his hawklike beak so that he looked like a Turkish pasha or a Bedouin chief.

But his polished greeting, in the accents of an English gentleman, had nothing Oriental about it. Jean felt ashamed of her scruples.

'Dear ladies,' he explained as he ushered them through the door, 'our houses were built for the sunshine, not for the cold winds of winter. This *khamseen* would freeze a money-lender's heart. You must keep your wraps until you discover whether our dining-room is too cold for you!'

Across a little antechamber they came into a splendid

lofty room with a vaulted ceiling. Soft-hued silken rugs hid the naked masonry of the walls save on one side, giving on the court, Jean assumed, which was screened by high curtains. Broad divans ran round two walls, and at each of the four corners of the apartment tall braziers glowed, faintly scenting the room with the fumes of burning wood. From the ceiling two great mosque lamps of ancient bluish glass, richly painted, hung on chains and threw a pleasantly modulated light on the dinner-table spread below. At the far end of the chamber, on a little dais, before a curtained door, a buffet was laid out.

'A *Zakuska!*' cried Madame Alexandrovna as she saw it and clapped her hands excitedly. '*Comme vous êtes gentil, mon cher!*'

The Prince laughed.

'Since you wouldn't let us eat after the fashion of my people,' he remarked, 'I told myself we should dine after the manner of yours. Alas! there is none of your delicious Russian partridge or that famous pâté of Siberian hare that was so good at Kubar's in the old days. But the vodka, at least, is genuine!'

He escorted them to the buffet and helped them to caviar. Jean had to try one of the tiny glasses of the clear white spirit. It brought the tears to her eyes and made her cough. But Nadia dashed off two in rapid succession and, crying, 'Who ever saw a stool with two legs?" accepted the Prince's offer of a third.

'Will you be cold?' he asked them anxiously. 'Do you want to keep your wraps?'

Jean let her shawl slide off her white shoulders, for, after the bitter wind of the street, the room was pleasantly warm. Nadia followed suit and displayed a

wonderful gown of peacock-blue brocade. Jean felt Said Hussein run his eye over her silver frock.

'Charming, charming!' he pronounced. 'Do you know, you're altogether the classical type, my dear, but something rather coldly chaste, I fear — the grey-eyed Pallas Athene or Diana the Huntress!'

Jean, nibbling an olive, laughed merrily.

'It's the close season for the hunt!' she said.

He glanced across at Nadia who, her bare bronze back turned to the room, was slicing smoked salmon at the buffet. 'You are delicious!' he murmured, and fumbled for her hand. His voice had a curious ring and his tawny eyes were dullish as though they peered through a film of gossamer. Jean danced away.

'Both hands busy,' she chaffed him, 'one to hold the olive and the other to catch the stone. But you can put some more of that delicious caviar on a piece of toast for me, if you like!'

The three of them made a very merry dinner under one of the great mosque lamps. Glass of such exquisite fineness was no longer blown, the Prince told them. It was said to be the work of Venetian craftsmen captured by the prowling war-galleys of the old Caliphs. Not more than a hundred of these lamps were known to exist.

'There are three in this house,' he said, 'two in this room and one on the upper floor in the *Kaa*, that's the reception room of the women's quarters. You must see the harem afterwards. It hasn't been used for many years. Old Osman el Maghraby — you met him at dinner at my house — is unmarried and he won't have any of his female relations near him.'

'And your fortune-teller, *dîtes*, Hussein?' demanded Nadia. 'Is he really coming?'

'He's in the house at this very moment,' the Prince rejoined, 'meditating in solitude as he always does before going into one of his trances . . .'

'Do you mean to say he falls into a genuine trance?' asked Jean.

'He does, indeed. I'd better warn you both that Sheikh Abdullah takes himself very seriously. He'd be bitterly offended if any of us were to laugh at him. He insists on being alone with his subject and I had the very dickens of a job' — he added to Jean — 'to persuade him to let me be present and interpret for you: — he speaks no English . . .'

'In that case,' Nadia put in, 'I shall stay and hear your fortune and find out all your secrets, Said Hussein!'

'He won't have his told,' said Jean, looking at the Prince.

'My fate is written,' he said. 'My hair isn't white yet, so I suppose I have some time to go. As for the sign of the Ram which is to prove fatal to me, well, that's astrology, isn't it? a science, I'm afraid, that's beyond me . . .'

Makhmoud, appearing behind his chair, bowed low and whispered in his ear.

'The Sheikh Abdullah is coming,' the Prince announced. 'We have to humour these holy men,' he added. 'Nadia, my dear, will you go into the next room?'

He escorted her up to the dais and raised the curtain at the back for her to pass through. Two servants appeared with poles and silently extinguished the two great lamps. The lofty chamber was lit only by the leaping flames of the braziers. The Prince led Jean over to one of the broad divans against the wall. On glancing

up she saw a figure in native dress standing in the centre of the room. She had not heard anyone come in. Said Hussein laid his hand on his turban and turned to Jean. 'Sheikh Abdullah!' he said.

A Sheikh and a diviner, at that, had suggested to Jean a greybeard. But this was a young man, scarcely more than a youth, very slim, very dark-complexioned, in a turban, tightly rolled in spirals about a little white cap, and a pink silk *kaftan* slashed with black. He salaamed profoundly, his eyes, dark and luminous and rather prominent, fixed on her face. He smiled and made a remark to Hussein. His voice was very soft: his manner retiring, almost bashful.

'He says he is not in the mood for fortune-telling,' the prince translated. 'He does not like strange places. Have you any silver?' Jean opened her bag. 'Two of those ten-piastre pieces will do. Now tie them up in your handkerchief, so!'

A servant advanced from the shadows of the room with a flat open dish on a tripod and a lump of charcoal glowing between tongs. The Sheikh took the tongs and dropped the coal in the dish. A heavy greyish smoke arose at once and the air reeked with the pungent fragrance of incense. He was muttering a string of words to himself. He drew the smoking dish towards the divan and, sitting down, began rocking himself to and fro, inhaling the vapour. Said Hussein dropped Jean's handkerchief with the silver knotted in the corner into his lap, motioning the girl to be seated.

The servant had disappeared. The braziers threw long shadows across the tiled floor. A thin drift of perfumed smoke hung in the radiance of their flickering flames. Suddenly Sheikh Abdullah snatched up Jean's

handkerchief and pressed it to his face. His nostrils twitched, sniffing ecstatically, and he rolled over on one elbow. Slowly he righted himself until he rested with his back against the wall, his legs tucked away beneath him. In a high falsetto he began to speak.

His eyes were glazed like those of a drunken man. His air of self-effacement was gone. He spoke loudly, in a harsh and domineering voice, with extravagant gestures, throwing his body about the divan and at times laughing uproariously. Now he was like a child that shows off, now a bad actor tearing a passion to tatters, now a preacher afire with the flame of his eloquence; but, with it all, he seemed to be playing to an invisible audience. At least, he was never conscious of the man and woman at his side.

He acted every word. When, as it shall presently appear, he spoke of illness, he was a sick man with a plaintive mien and an air of exhaustion. He used the simile of a hoarded treasure, and behold! he was the miser, straining his coffer to his breast, his eyes darting fearful glances about him. When he mentioned pride, he was the Oriental in his pomp, erect, superb, disdainful, now imitating one who rides a horse raised up above his fellows, now chuckling exultingly and fingering his girdle as though a well-filled purse hung there.

But when he simulated danger, he was as a man transfigured. His eyes started from his head, his face became distorted, and he quivered from head to foot. His distress was pitiable, the sweat beaded upon his forehead and the words burst from his lips in a kind of groan.

Presently the spasm passed as he began to tell of the peace that awaits the traveller at the end of his journey.

His voice was hushed, his eyes closed, and a happy smile played about his mobile mouth . . .

You must picture the scene for yourselves: Jean, rather awed, leaning forward, her face shining in the ruddy glow of the braziers, the Prince in shadow at her side, swiftly translating in a low monotone as the words poured out in a torrent from the vehemently agitated figure on the couch. Stripped of much verbiage, Oriental tropes and invocations of Allah and his prophet Mohammed, this is how Jean Averil's fortune ran:

'Sickness has visited your house and you are grieved. Someone that cherishes and esteems you is ill and gives you concern. But fear not! No pitcher is broken at the water-hole but that the inscrutable wisdom and justice of Allah has so ordained it . . .

'You are like a man with a treasure. He exults in it, he is proud of it, he tells his friends about it when he meets them on Friday at the mosque. At dead of night he takes it from its hiding-place and fondles it, secretly delighting. He is puffed up in his heart . . .

'He says to himself: "This is my treasure, my very own. What precautions have I not taken to guard it? Once a thief broke in and took it from me. What toil, what agony of mind, it cost me to recover it! No thief shall prevail again. I have put new locks on my doors, I have doubled my watchmen, I have bought from the English merchant a strong-box of iron in which to keep safe my treasure. It is mine, it is mine! By so much am I elevated above the heads of my fellows, like the Sheikh of the Sadiyeh on his horse . . . !" This speaks he in his pride. He does not know that even now thieves are making ready to steal the light of his eyes . . .

'I am the watchman on the tower. I look down upon

the roof of your house and see you guarding your treasure. I see one who comes boldly along the lane, his mouth full of fair words, his hands full of gifts. But beware . . . !

'Danger, danger everywhere. There is a cloud about the stranger's face, it thickens, he is disappearing, he is gone. Beware! Beware of the happiness he offers . . . !

'Another traveller approaches your house. He is sorrowful and he brings you sorrow. Tears trail behind him like the water that drips from the skins of the water-carrier. Guard your treasure, guard your treasure! Ah! it is too late! He has stolen it and carried it away, on a ship, far across the seas . . .

'After sorrow joy, by the grace of Allah, whose Prophet is Mohammed. That which Allah the All-Merciful has appointed must befall; but then you shall find peace, peace and happiness greater than you have ever known. Long is the road of the grief-laden through the mountains of the burial-place. But there is an end of every journey and the name of your resting-place is peace . . .'

The voice, droning away to a whisper, was silent. The Sheikh's head fell forward on his breast. He muttered to himself, opened his eyes. He blinked and looked about him unsteadily, sighed, and, stooping, gathered up from a tray under the dish a few pinches of incense which he sprinkled on the fire. The smoke mounted. The Prince nudged Jean. 'Stand up!' he bade her.

Jean rose. The incense cloud made eddies about her silver dress. The Sheikh performed some passes, muttering in Arabic, and touched her hand. Then he drew himself erect and remained still, smiling thoughtfully

at the girl. He was calm and rather diffident again. He said something in Arabic to Hussein.

The Prince stood up. His eyes glinted redly in the firelight and his voice was rather thick when he spoke. 'It's finished,' he announced. 'The Sheikh wants to keep your handkerchief, do you mind? No, no, please put that away' — Jean had opened her bag. 'He had to have those twenty piastres of yours because he wanted money that you yourself had handled. But the rest is my business. Now we'll get Nadia . . .'

Jean followed him across the room. She was a little disappointed about her fortune. The Prince had assured them that he had told Abdullah nothing about her or Nadia and it was certainly surprising that the Sheikh should have known about Simmons being in hospital; also his allusion to the "mountains of the burial-place" suggested her stay at Luxor. But she could not understand all his talk about a treasure . . .

Nadia bobbed out on the dais brimming over with excitement. They left her alone with the Sheikh and passed up a few shallow steps into the adjoining room, smaller than the one they had left, but similarly hung with old prayer-carpets. There they found Makhmoud, palpably ill at ease. He salaamed and spoke a few hurried words in an undertone in Arabic. A look of vexation came into the Prince's face and he snapped out an angry question. The servant replied, pointing over his shoulder. Said Hussein turned to Jean.

'Look here,' he said apologetically, 'it's very annoying. But I have to see someone who's arrived unexpectedly on urgent business. Would you think me very rude . . . ?'

'Of course not,' Jean told him.

'I'll not be long,' he explained. 'In the meantime, I'll take you up to the women's quarters. You can be having a look round while you're waiting. It's this way . . .'

He lifted a curtain in the corner. Facing them a brightly coloured hanging screened an old bronze gate, beyond it a flight of stairs. At the top of the flight they came upon a heavy door which opened on a long and narrow hall, panelled in wood at the two ends, a kind of central court of marble set in the middle under a lantern of stained glass perforated in patterns of flowers.

At the far end was a balcony screened in with beautifully carved woodwork. The ceiling was elaborately decorated with pale green arabesques which also ran along a broad frieze below. In the centre of the marble court a fountain murmured in a green mosaic basin. Soft rugs deadened the sound of feet on the flagged floor and low tables of mother-of-pearl and ebony or of plain wood supporting brass trays stood about. The room was lit by a great mosque lamp suspended from the glass cupola.

'There are some other rooms in there,' said Hussein, pointing to a door off the marble court, 'and those alcoves at the end are interesting; it's where they used to keep the beds rolled up in the daytime. Now I must go. I'll be as quick as I can. Do make yourself at home . . .'

He pressed her hand, his tawny eyes burning at her through their strange dull haze. More than once at dinner she had detected him thus staring at her and she felt embarrassed. For the first time she found herself

remembering that the Prince was an Egyptian, an Oriental. Curious that native dress should make such a change in a man. Was it only his Eastern robes . . . ? The door slammed and she was alone.

CHAPTER XX

MR. SIMONOU'S MISSION

Mr. Simonou, a black Persian fez on his head, a black cloak gathered about him, stepped swiftly out of the entrance of the Hôtel Delphos into the wind-swept arcades of the Boulevard Clot Bey. In a dozen hasty strides he had reached the end of the street. He crossed the busy square that there fringes the Esbekia Gardens and down a cobbled alley plunged into the labyrinth of the Fish-Market.

It was Sunday night, the free evening of the Nubian servants, and the narrow lanes were thronged. The Greek, his hands pressed to his body beneath his cloak, slackened his pace to the strolling gait of the crowds that surged past the dark and narrow entries, where, in the light of dim oil-lamps, the women sat. They were of all ages and many races, some quite young, others middled with years, puffy Germans with peroxide tresses and swimmy eyes, slim Egyptians, exquisitely graceful, with dank black hair and henna-ed nails, or merry Sudanese grinning out of ebon faces with tattoo marks on their lips and bangles on their ankles.

In the little open-fronted cafés native orchestras made the night hideous and to the thump of the drum dancing-girls swayed and postured and stamped, whilst others, seated round the walls, with listless, nonchalant eyes, beat their palms together with the characteristic downward gesture of the East.

Sometimes a dark hand laid on his arm sought to detain the Greek. But he gently shook himself free and

continued on his way, nor did he, with the rest of those about him, pause to gape at two Egyptians, livid with passion, who screeched abuse at one another at a street corner. He went steadily forward, never hastening his step, never looking back, seemingly unconscious of the tall, green-turbaned native who had shadowed him since he had faced the cutting wind of the Boulevard Clot Bey.

Presently he turned into a lane narrower than the rest and, swinging round a corner-café where the Greek proprietor, shirt-sleeved behind his beer-engines, watched two natives soldiers playing backgammon in solitary state, entered a *cul-de-sac*, the high wall of an enclosure at the end, tall old houses on either side. And now the stroller glanced over his shoulder and, seeing the street clear, darted into a doorway the better to observe. But the opening of the *impasse* remained deserted. With a little smile he emerged from his hiding-place and swiftly diving under an archway, whence thudded the dull note of a drum, crossed a yard and entered a lofty and narrow room.

It was blazing with light, full of people, clamorous with noise. The benches all round the walls were packed with men and girls, laughing, joking, singing, squabbling, and at the little tables on the floor the groups were thick as the clusters of flies on the ceiling. From time to time couples pushed their way through the press and disappeared up a grimy stair in the corner.

Simonou stood for an instant in the doorway and surveyed the scene. In a little a girl rose from her seat on the bench and slowly approached him, swinging her hips. She had the frail arms of youth and behind the kohl her eyes were the clean, honest eyes of a child.

She sidled up to the Greek, glancing archly at him from under her long lashes and smiling. With her milk-white teeth she nibbled a corner of the veil she wore about her head. She murmured something in a crooning little voice. Simonou's restless eyes glanced swiftly round. He nodded, almost imperceptibly. Then he followed the girl across the café to the winding stair.

Out of the gloom of a fetid passage a dim shape emerged. There was the rustle of loose slippers, the rasp of whispered Arabic. The girl, who was leading, stopped and the Greek thrust some silver into her hand. He waited until he heard her anklets jingle as she tripped back by the way they had come. Then he turned. A hand grasped his and led him through the dark.

A door creaked. A gap of grey light appeared. An empty cask, against a mud wall, the cobbles of the street came into view. A bank-note thrust into a filthy girdle, a whispered invocation. '*Inshallah!*' responded the Greek devoutly and stepped into the silent lane. Softly the door shut behind him. He glanced cautiously up and down the empty alley, then, his hands beneath his cloak, he began to run.

As he vanished into darkness, a tall form rose up from behind the cask and, with a long swinging stride set off in pursuit.

Simonou pounded down the flagged lane. Now he was beyond the precincts of the city of shame and the narrow street wound along past some small shops, mostly shuttered save where, by lamplight, a lonely cobbler hammered at his last or a bespectacled tailor, cross-legged upon his bench, stooped over his sewing.

The runner crossed himself as he passed the domes of the Greek Orthodox Church, traversed the tram-lines of a busy thoroughfare, and was engulfed once more in a network of little streets, panting now, the perspiration pouring down his face in streams, his cloak flapping about him. And always beneath it his hands were pressed to his body.

At last, as he staggered along in the shadow of a little mosque, his forces began to fail. He slackened his pace to a walk and, turning, glanced behind. The street was empty, but round the angle of the mosque he heard the soft pit-pat of running feet. His snake eyes narrowed in terror.

At the door of a house an empty wagon rested on its shafts. He darted behind the cart, crouching down and peering through the dusty spokes towards the street corner. He strained his ears to listen. The patter of the feet had died away. But he did not move. He waited, his clothes damp upon his body, his heart yet leaping with the fright that was in him.

At length he stole out and, after a wary glance around, walked hastily away. He threaded another lane, crossed a broader thoroughfare, and, slipping down a byway between the houses, stopped at length before a yard with a rickety wooden gate that trembled and creaked in the wind. It framed a little door which opened to his push. Once more he looked behind. The lane was empty. Quickly he stepped inside the yard.

As the little door swung to, a gaunt form appeared at the end of the alley.

The yard was quite dark and so were the vaulted chambers that surrounded it under half-ruined gal-

leries, some of which, through holes in the roof, showed a glimpse of the stars. The centre was a wilderness of carts through which Simonou swiftly made his way towards a light that burned at the head of a flight of stairs mounting to the galleries at the end.

But he did not climb the stairs. He entered under a low doorway on their left and, traversing a black passage, came to a little hall where a servant in red livery lay sleeping on a trestle-bed.

His entrance roused the man, who sprang to his feet.

'Where is the Prince, Makhmoud?' Simonou demanded in Arabic. 'I must see him at once.'

The man looked uneasy. 'The Lord Said Hussein is in native dress,' he said. 'And there are women here. The pasha knows that at these times my lord may not be disturbed.'

'Go! Tell him I have come!' Simonou commanded.

'Pasha, I dare not!' The servant's eyes were staring with fear. 'My lord is with the Sheikh Abdullah, the holy man, and one of the European women.'

'Do you mean Madame Alexandrovna?'

'*La, la!*' Makhmoud shook his head. 'The American woman.'

Simonou's face was suddenly ghastly. Imperatively he pointed at the door. 'Do as I bid you. I will explain to your master.'

The man wavered, then, bowing, slipped away. Five minutes passed before he reappeared.

'My lord will see you!'

Simonou found the Prince in a small square room hung with silken rugs. His greeting of the Greek was curt and irascible. 'I don't like having my door forced,

Simonou,' he said. 'You compel me to neglect my guests. What is it? Why do you come here?'

'All day I've been trying to get in touch with you,' the Greek replied. 'I didn't dare leave the hotel until I knew where you were. They told me you would be here for certain after ten o'clock.'

'Well,' snapped the Prince, 'now that you are here, what is it you want?'

From beneath his cloak Simonou produced a package and placed it on the table. He loosed the silk cloth that enveloped it and the golden figure of a crouching dog stood revealed.

'Humph!' Said Hussein's manner was a shade more friendly as he picked up the statuette and examined it. 'Anubis, Eighteenth Dynasty, eh? Very nice! Where does it come from?'

'From Cradock's dig at Deir el-Bahari.'

'Really! But why trouble to hand it over yourself?'

'Because they're watching us, Said Hussein. They're watching us!'

The Prince laughed. 'That's what the Department of Antiquities is there for,' he returned.

'I wish you were not so insanely foolhardy,' the Greek retorted with exasperation. 'I came here tonight to disturb you in the midst of your pleasures because once already this damned statuette nearly landed us in disaster.'

The Prince raised his eyebrows. 'Why?' he demanded. 'If it comes from Cradock's dig, Ali got it, I presume?'

'He did. But they must have suspected something, for they posted a man of their own to meet Ali's messenger instead of me . . .'

'"They"! Who are "they"?' the Prince interrupted irritably.

'Cradock!'

'Ah! Any proof?'

'I took a chance and raided Cradock's house the next night. The statuette was there!'

'Good!' observed the Prince cheerfully. 'Well, you can leave the statuette with me. I shan't want you any more to-night.'

Simonou dashed his cloak down on a chair. 'Is that all the thanks I get? Do you realise that to bring that figure to you in this house every one of us has been shadowed step by step from the hillside at Qurna?'

The Prince's attitude was suddenly watchful. But his air was nonchalant as he retorted: 'You've only yourself to blame. You seem to have made a pretty mess of things between you.'

'Oh? And you? Will you tell me how it happened that the night that Shadly broke in at Cradock's your charming Mrs. Averil was sleeping there? Made a mess of it, have we? Don't you think you might be more careful in the choice of your friends? I know that woman's here now . . .'

A small pulse throbbed visibly in Said Hussein's temple. His hand opened and shut once.

'Are you trying to give me advice, Simonou?' he asked in a voice of deadly calm.

But Simonou ignored the warning. Fear had made him desperate.

'You can do what you like!' he cried. 'But I'm through. Mile for mile they tracked me from Luxor to Cairo.' He lowered his voice. 'There was a man following me to-night. I think I threw him off the trail,

but I'm not sure. Ah, that touches you, does it? What becomes of the secret of Mr. Ramosi if they trace me to you? Will you answer me that? If they get me, they get you: make no mistake about that, Said Hussein. The pace is too hot, I tell you' — his voice rose to a scream. 'I'm quitting, Said Hussein. Mr. Ramosi can find another man!'

He dropped into a chair, panting, hysterical. The Prince clapped his hands.

'Coffee, Makhmoud,' he said to the servant. 'And strong. The Abyssinian coffee that the pasha likes.'

The curtains parted. Nadia Alexandrovna appeared in the vaulted doorway behind Simonou's chair.

'*Ciel!*' she cried. 'You have broken the spell, you and your noise. The Sheikh Abdullah has departed in a rage. *Tiens,* Simonou?'

Hussein made a sign. 'Leave him alone, Nadia!' He pointed to the statuette. 'Carry that up to the store. And listen! Take the car and go home after that, do you understand me?'

The woman stopped. 'And the American?'

'You can send the car back. I will see her home.'

Nadia had gathered up the figure. Now she turned and faced Hussein.

'No, no,' she said. 'If she stays, I stay!'

The Prince was lighting a cigarette. He looked at her fixedly over the match.

'You will do as I tell you!' he said calmly.

The woman tossed her head. 'And leave you with that woman. *Penses-tu?*'

She laughed scornfully.

He crossed the room and confronted her over the table. He pointed to a curtained door in the corner.

'Go!' he said.

She tried to defy him; but she wilted under his glance.

'Hussein, let this girl be!' she pleaded, and put the statuette down. 'Look at me! Am I not beautiful? It is not two months since I came back to you and already you turn away . . .'

She hushed her voice so that the Greek should not hear. But he sat huddled in his chair, seemingly oblivious of all that went on about him.

The Prince pointed again to the door. 'Go and do my bidding!' he said.

'Hussein . . .' she faltered.

Makhmoud entered noiselessly, a brass pot in one hand, in the other a tray with the porcelain cup in its gold filigree stand and a glass of water. He looked interrogatively at the Prince. Master and man exchanged an understanding glance. Hussein clapped Simonou on the shoulder.

'Pull yourself together!' he said. 'Here's some coffee for you!'

Nadia yet hesitated. 'Hussein . . .' she said again.

He did not even look at her.

'Go!' he commanded.

With a little pathetic shrug of the shoulders she picked up the statuette and left the room.

Makhmoud poured out the coffee for Simonou. From the spouted pot the servant filled the cup to the brim and set down the tray. Noiselessly he retired. The Greek looked up and cast his cloak from him. He picked up the cup and drained it. He took a cigarette from the box that Hussein held out and lit it.

The Prince sat down and stretched his hands in front of him on the table.

'So you were followed from Luxor?' he said, playing with a paper-knife, his eyes on the other's face. 'Who was it, do you know?'

'There were some of the Public Security men at the station. Again to-night I heard footsteps behind me as I came through the Wasa. I dodged out by El Gharbi's and I thought I had shaken them off. But later, close by here, I heard them again — soft footsteps running after me in the dark. It was horrible! It's given me palpitations!'

He mopped his dank brow with his handkerchief. Hussein never took his eyes off him. The Greek's face was a greenish-sallow hue.

'Hell!' he cried, and flung his cigarette down. 'This cigarette's filthy. I believe . . . it's damp . . . Hussein!'

He was panting. His hands were clawing at his chest.

'I ran . . . to-night. I'm not . . . used to it. Strained . . . my heart. Ah!'

A spasm of pain shook him. He gasped and raised his ghastly face. His eyes met Hussein's as the Prince sat in his chair regarding him imperturbably. Then he spoke and his voice was a mere rattle in his throat.

'My God!' he panted. 'You wouldn't dare . . . Ah!'

He had risen, trying to cry out. There was foam on his lips, his mouth opened and shut, his face worked grotesquely. Clawing at his chest, he pitched forward across the table, shaken by convulsions.

Softly the Prince clapped his hands and rose. Makhmoud appeared. Hussein pointed to the twitching body. It was arched like a bow. 'Let Voronian see to it,' he ordered. 'Tell him to come to me when he has done so!'

Then he drew aside the curtain in the corner of the room and briskly, pushing his way through the old bronze gate, mounted the stairs to the room above where he had left Jean Averil.

CHAPTER XXI

THE WOMAN ON THE BALCONY

STEALTHILY following in Simonou's wake, Cradock halted at the yard gate through which the Greek had disappeared. He could hardly believe that the chase was over at last: for hours he seemed to have been shadowing that black, hurrying figure through the highways and byways of the city of the Caliphs.

He breathed in deep and regular breaths like a trained athlete. Below his turban the moisture pearled on his face; but he did not pause for rest. His hand went out and softly tried the little door within the gate. It was fast.

This man was of iron. He granted himself no respite. There had been something terrifying in the dogged persistence wherewith he had clung to the trail, something uncanny in the way in which he had forestalled the turns and twists of his quarry. Few knew the Arab city as did David Cradock, and, even as he was at home among its labyrinthine lanes, so was he familiar with the intricate workings of the Oriental, and the Orientalised mind.

Thus, when Simonou, on leaving the Hôtel Delphos, had turned to the right, his pursuer had divined that the Fish-Market was the objective, and, this forecast realised, he had been virtually certain that the house of El Gharbi would be the quarry's next goal. Once the Greek had entered the *cul-de-sac*, his relentless shadow had foreseen the succeeding move as well: it was not

the first time that, under cover of a visit to that hospitable mansion, a criminal had sought to throw pursuit off his track.

The gate was set in a long and straggling mud wall. With his eye Cradock measured the distance from the ground to the top. Then he tightened his belt, crammed his turban more firmly on his head, and leaped. His hands grasped the smooth and rounded ridge of the wall and, with a swift, buoyant effort, he drew himself up, threw a leg over the top and dropped silently to the ground on the other side.

The spacious yard in which he landed he recognised at once as a ruined *okella*, one of those inns used by the great caravans in the old days. It consisted of a spacious open court with warehouses for the goods all round and rooms for the merchants under the galleries above. A single light winked at him from a staircase mounting from the end of the yard. He paused under the wall and listened. Everything was silent and Simonou had disappeared.

Cautiously he threaded a passage through a litter of carts. The whole place was in darkness save for that lonely lamp at the top of the stairs. Softly he mounted and found himself facing a door.

It stood ajar. There was a glimmer of light within. He listened. Silence! Very gently he pushed the door with his foot. Its hinges were oiled and it moved inward without a sound.

He was looking into a bare room. Along one side were tables on trestles littered with wood shavings and packing-cases stood about the floor. There was an iron door in the right-hand wall.

From the wall opposite the door a balcony jutted out,

let in with wooden gratings, broken and hanging from their hinges. From the roof of the recess a lamp was suspended and beneath it, her back to the wall, stood a woman in evening dress.

He remained immobile in the doorway, rooted to the spot in blank amazement. But it was not the sight of a European woman clad in a clinging frock of peacock-blue brocade in the bare room of the ruined *khan* that paralyzed his will. It was the poise of her head, the droop of her arms, the way in which her jet-black hair clustered about her ears — the things that linger in a man's memory to whisper to him of a woman he has loved, though her very name be forgotten — that, for the moment, banished the thought of his mission from his mind and left him dazed and helpless.

'Nadia!'

He spoke the name in a voice that was scarcely above a whisper. But at the sound the woman in the window whipped round. She had a handkerchief in her hand and the tears were wet on her face.

With bewildered eyes she stared at that gaunt, dark vision in the doorway, recoiling against the worm-eaten *mashrabiyeh* screening. Suddenly the man strode forward and putting his hand on her shoulder drew her into the room under the lamp.

'What are you doing in this place?'

At the sound of the English voice the wonder faded from her eyes and gladness entered there. Her bosom heaved and her head fell forward on his shoulder.

'David!' she cried, 'at last! After all these years!'

He drew away from her, eyes sombre, mouth grim.

'What are you doing here?' he repeated.

She stretched her arms, bare and bronzed and

shapely, towards him as he looked down on her sternly from his full height.

'What does it matter?' she murmured softly. 'What does anything matter now that I have found you again? Why did you not answer my letters, David? I could have explained everything, everything. *Voyons*, don't stand there regarding me so angrily! Have I changed so much? Am I no longer the little Nadia whose hair you used to kiss . . . ?'

Harshly he interrupted her. 'Whose house is this?'

She turned aside and dropped her eyes. Her bare shoulders went up in a provoking little shrug.

'Who brought you here? You must know that?'

She glanced quickly at him out of the corner of her green eyes.

'Said Hussein!'

A shadow seemed to pass across the dark, impassive face.

'Where's Simonou?'

'I don't know!' — sullenly.

He gripped her arm. 'Don't lie to me, Nadia! I saw him enter this house just now!'

The Christian name softened her.

'With Said Hussein. I left them downstairs togeth . . . *Grand Dieu!* What's that?'

A piercing scream had rung out suddenly across the silent yard.

After Said Hussein had left her, Jean walked slowly down the room. It was magnificently proportioned, the colour scheme restful, from the green-and-white decoration of the ceiling to the soft tones of the old rugs under-

foot. There was not a sound to be heard. She might have been a hundred miles from the noise of Cairo.

She peeped into the alcoves of which Hussein had told her, little slits in the masonry of the walls, empty now. She tried to picture the trousered women of the harem, chattering shrilly as she had heard them round the wells in Upper Egypt, stowing the mattresses away while the early morning sunshine filtered through the *mashrabiyeh* screens. She wandered into the adjoining rooms, cold and bare, with oriel windows looking out at blank walls across the dark and narrow lane.

Her host was a long time absent. She wondered what had become of Nadia. The Sheikh must have finished telling her fortune by this. Jean, who had come to rest on one of the green silk divans set against the wall by the screened balcony at the end of the hall, felt a little stirring of uneasiness. It had suddenly occurred to her that she was alone in the Arab quarter surrounded by natives. She had read horrible stories in the magazines about European women being lured away to Oriental harems. She tried to smile away the thought and, to distract her mind, got up and stood on the balcony.

It was completely shut in by screens of woodwork. They were old and very rickety. Jean could feel them tremble in the night wind. Her fingers interlaced in the knobbed bars, as many a woman, she told herself, might have stood before her, she peered out into the night. But all was dark outside and she could make out nothing beyond the dim line of some building opposite. And then, to the right of her, she saw the yellow blur of a light.

The balcony projected with three sides from the room. In front, and to left and right, little niches about

a foot high jutted out with doors that opened. Jean unlatched the trap on the right and looked out.

She found herself gazing, over a space of perhaps a dozen feet, at just such another balcony as that on which she stood. A lamp swayed slightly in the upper part and below, where part of the wooden screening had fallen away, she could see something gleam and shimmer. There was the glint of blue and silver; and suddenly it dawned upon Jean that she was looking at Nadia Alexandrovna's blue brocade frock — now she could see a 'V' of bronzed back.

She was about to tap on the woodwork to attract her attention when a very strange thing happened. The woman strained back against the screen and into the yellow lamplight the head and shoulders of a native projected, green turban, dark face. A brown hand flashed out, there was the gleam of dull silver through the chequering and the woman, without a word, allowed herself to be plucked from her corner. Together with the green turban and the dark face, she glided noiselessly out of Jean's sight.

Rather flushed, her breath coming and going quickly, Jean drew back. What was Nadia Alexandrovna thinking of? The idea of an assignation with a native shocked her Anglo-Saxon conscience profoundly. Had she been brought to this house to act as cover for the Russian's rendezvous? No, the Prince, she felt sure, would never stand for that sort of thing. But it opened her eyes to the value of Madame Alexandrovna's chaperonage and she resolved to go home as quickly as possible.

A firm step sounded on the stairs. Swiftly she regained her place on the divan. Said Hussein parted the curtains at the other end of the room. He hurried across the floor to her.

'I'm overwhelmed with shame for having left you alone for so long,' he cried.

She tried to be genial; but her growing uneasiness made her formal.

'Don't apologise,' she said nervously. 'Is the car there? I really must be getting back. Will you tell Madame Alexandrovna that I'm going?'

He exclaimed at that. It was quite early. And he wanted to show her the house.

Another time, she told him. She had had a long day and was tired. Where was Madame Alexandrovna?

He had dropped on the divan at her side. He leant on one elbow, looking up at her face.

'She'll be here directly,' he answered rather hoarsely. He drew a trifle nearer and she felt his hot breath on her neck. Some subtle perfume hung about him or his robes. It rose to her nostrils and it made her desperately afraid. She had been a fool to come, a fool to trust Madame Alexandrovna. She might have known that the Russian would let her down.

She drew away, sitting very erect, nervously smoothing out her frock on her lap. Hussein clapped his hand over hers as it rested on the silver fabric.

'Jean . . .' he said thickly.

A sort of panic was gaining over her. Swiftly she told herself that she must keep her head. The deathlike silence of the house appalled her, and with a sinking heart she again remembered the hopelessness of her position, in the heart of the Arab quarter, if . . . if . . .

Playfully she drew her hand away.

'Now,' she said, 'you've got to be good, Prince. Let's go down and find Madame Alexandrovna, shall we?'

Her hands were like ice and she knew that her voice trembled.

The man's eyes were inflamed and his face was livid. He looked as though he had been drinking. He snatched at her hand. 'Jean!' His voice strangled.

In alarm she sprang to her feet. He leapt at her, trying to seize her in his arms. She broke away and backed in terror to the balcony.

'You're . . . you're drunk!' she cried.

He laughed. His eyes were flushed redly as though they swam in blood and his nostrils opened and shut.

'Drunk with love of you,' he answered. 'Don't be silly, Jean . . .'

He took a step towards her.

'Stay where you are,' she cried. 'If you don't I'll scream for help!'

He advanced again, she retreating slowly. The screenwork of the balcony rasped against her bare back and she knew that she was trapped.

'Please . . .' she said pitifully.

And then he sprang at her and she screamed piercingly. His arms were round her now, his face ghastly in the soft light. She screamed again, trying to fight him off with her fists. But his grip was of steel, and soon her only thought was to keep that turbaned face with the glowing, lustful eyes away from hers.

'Help!' she cried.

There came a crash and a splintering noise and the woodwork behind her rocked violently. A section of the screen fell inwards and in the gap the tall figure of a native stood poised on the stonework of the balcony without. He hung balanced there for a second, and then, with the spring of a tiger, leapt down at the throat of Said Hussein.

CHAPTER XXII

DEMONSTRATING THAT A DOOR MAY BE BOTH SHUT AND OPEN

Two steps led up to the balcony. Reeling backward under the shock of that unexpected onslaught, the Prince stumbled over them and measured his length on the ground. But his fall shook his aggressor from his throat and the native pitched forward beyond him on the soft rugs.

Both men were on their feet together. Terrified, yet at the same time fascinated, Jean shrank back in the window recess and watched them, Hussein, white with anger, snarling inarticulately in Arabic, the native silent, but armed with an air both watchful and menacing. Even before he had opened his lips, even before the English words he spoke had corroborated her incredible discovery, she knew that bold regard, that copper-coloured face.

Her courage returned. True, it was the courage of despair: for she dared not exchange her present plight for the unknown dangers of that silent house or of the honeycomb lanes beyond the gate. She realised that she could only stay where she was and await the issue. But deep down within her there stirred unbidden the thrill of her race for a fight, mingled with the throb that, since the beginning of the world, has quickened the heart of a woman at the sight of a man ready to do battle in her behalf. She could not look back, as those two men below her were looking, over the years of

rancour that their sudden meeting had instantly bridged; she did not know that between them stood, accusing, the wraith of youth betrayed, of love trampled underfoot. But she was conscious of the tension that kept those two bristling figures apart, holding them, for an instant that seemed an age, under its ban.

'You dirty sweep' — it was Cradock who broke the spell and his voice was low and threatening, like the growl of an angry dog — 'I've a good mind to teach you once and for all to keep your hands off white women!'

At the sound of the English accents, the uncompromisingly English words, the Prince checked and stared. The invective died away in his throat. His tongue moistened his lips. Under the long sleeves of his robe his fingers were suddenly clenched.

'Cradock . . . !' he exclaimed. An unpleasant smile appeared on his livid face. He glanced at Jean, standing pale and impassive at the window, and bowed ironically, 'I must congratulate Mrs. Averil' — he paused and, with deliberate offensiveness, scanned Cradock from head to foot — 'on her picturesque champion.' He checked. 'Or should I say partner, I wonder?' He scrutinized his nails with a little thoughtful air. 'My dear Cradock,' he remarked in his easy, polished way, 'I seem fated to take your women off your hands!'

Cradock's eyes grew hot; but he retained his self-control. He turned to Jean. 'Let us get your cloak,' he said. 'I'll take you home!'

Then the Prince stepped forward.

'Mrs. Averil is my guest!' he declared. His face was very close to Cradock's. His pupils, glittering red like rubies, sought the other's eyes.

With a nonchalant air Cradock moved his head and spoke over his shoulder to Jean. 'Come!' he said.

'I shall see Mrs. Averil to her hotel myself.' Hussein's voice was raucous with rage. 'And you . . . get out of here before I have you thrown out!'

Cradock did not move a muscle. 'Where did you leave your wrap?' he asked Jean.

The blood mounted in the Egyptian's pale face. He was trembling with passion, and, when he opened his mouth to speak, inarticulate sounds issued forth.

'Get . . . get out of . . . this house!' he gasped at last, choking with fury.

Jean was moving towards Cradock when the Prince, suddenly stepping backwards, smartly clapped his hands and cried 'Makhmoud!' In that instant Cradock flew at him. The Englishman's left fist took him under the eye and he staggered back out of reach of the right that flashed after. A table with a brass tray on which stood a metal incense-burner went over with a clang. In the fury of his rush Cradock all but overbalanced and, as he regained his feet, Hussein was on him, squared up behind his right like a trained boxer.

He drove at Cradock, but the latter side-stepped and his right landed with a heavy jolt on the Egyptian's ribs. The Prince feinted with his right and his left streaked out and grazed his opponent's temple as Cradock ducked. But even as the Englishman ducked his long straight left shot upwards, Hussein checked and reeled, eyes goggling, arms sawing the air. Cradock, imperturbable and watchful, drew back and smashed his right home full in the frantic, distorted face. Hussein sank slowly to his knees, rocked there for an instant, then collapsed like a deflated balloon.

At that moment the door at the end of the room burst open. Makhmoud, the black body-servant, was there. He held an automatic in his hand. Behind him the white turban of a second man was visible. The servant paused for an instant to take in the scene, his master in his red-and-gold robe spread-eagled face downwards on the floor, beside the overturned table, Cradock standing over him with clenched fists, Jean, like a marble statue, behind.

'Down!' shouted Cradock.

Jean saw him crouch and automatically followed suit as, with a crash that filled the echoing hall with noise, the pistol spoke. But the range was long, a good twenty yards, and the light poor. As the man fired a second time, Cradock, who had stooped to the floor to gather up something, took two long bounds forward and a gleaming missile went hurtling through the air.

It caught the negroid on the side of the head, and as he tumbled back against the door the Englishman reached him and pinioned his arms. The incense-burner which, on the inspiration of the moment, Cradock had flung at the servant, had ripped a deep gash in the latter's temple and the hot blood splashed on the Englishman's hands as he grappled with the writhing figure.

A white form hurled itself at Cradock as, lifting Makhmoud like a puppet, he dashed the servant's head against the heavy timbers of the door. There was a sickening crack and the body went limp in his grasp.

But the other man, who had gone to Makhmoud's assistance, had got his wiry brown arms about Cradock's neck. He was a long, lean, shambling creature reeking of garlic. He hung desperately on the Englishman,

seeking to throttle him from behind. Cradock let Makhmoud go and the servant rolled senseless on the floor in a welter of blood that blended with the rich scarlet of his jacket. The Englishman suddenly tightened the muscles of his back, bent forward with a swift movement and jerked the light weight of the native clear of his head. The man's grip relaxed and he fell sprawling a good ten yards away. Snatching up one of the low tables as a club Cradock was after him. But the native, scrambling nimbly to his feet, dodged a heavy blow and darting under the Englishman's arm fled precipitately out of the door.

The whole house was in uproar now. Jean, who had advanced halfway down the room, heard the angry murmur of voices and the patter of many naked feet on the floor below. Cradock heard it, too, for he slammed the door on the native and shot the bolt before he joined her in the middle of the hall.

'The quarter's roused,' he said laconically. 'We must get out of this, quick.'

He walked swiftly to the window and, twisting his lean fingers in the wooden gratings, with a sudden tug, tore a great section of the *mashrabiyeh* away. He peered out over the balcony. The night was moonless and dark and a few stars glittered coldly through masses of cloud. About ten feet below the window the flat roof of a house was visible, flanked on either side by small inner courts.

Jean had joined him in the recess. He turned to her.

'We'll have to jump,' he said.

There was a rush of feet on the stone stairs without. Heavy blows thundered on the door. Cradock smiled into Jean's eyes.

'They haven't lost much time. But it's a good door and it will hold for a bit. The bolt's solid, too. The bolts in a harem are always efficient.'

His blue eyes examined her face.

'I'll have to go first,' he said, 'to catch you. How about it? Will you risk it? You'll have to, I'm afraid. It'll be awkward if we're found here' — he grinned— 'amongst all this mess.'

She nodded as bravely as she could.

'I'll jump,' she told him.

With his strong hands he broke the *mashrabiyeh* away until the stonework of the balcony was disengaged. The hubbub at the door continued. He swung his right leg over the sill, his left followed and for an instant he hung suspended by his hands. The mob on the stairs was yelling hoarsely and the door was shaking beneath tremendous blows. 'Quick!' Jean whispered.

Cradock dropped. He landed on all fours, lightly and almost without sound, like a cat. He picked himself up and stood with his arms stretched out to her, a dim figure in the dark.

Her frock was tight and it hampered her movements. She sat on the ledge and gathered her skirt about her knees. She looked down and hesitated. How far it seemed to jump and how black the twin abysses that yawned on either side of the narrow strip of roof! But there was a sudden stirring on the floor behind her followed by a stertorous groan. She glanced round in terror. The Prince had rolled over on his back and was tossing and grunting on the ground. His face was smeared with blood and horribly swollen. That decided her. Her back to the balcony she lowered herself down on her hands, paused an instant, then let herself

drop. Steady as a rock Cradock caught her. He spoke softly in her ear.

'We can't stay here,' he said. 'I had hoped that this roof ran clear to the street. But it doesn't. Look!'

He pointed. Facing them a blank wall, a good thirty feet high, rose at the end. Moreover, the roof on which they stood had no door giving access to the interior of the house as is usually found in the East. It seemed to cover a stable or an outhouse.

'We'll have to try one of these two courts,' Cradock went on. 'The one on the right ought to communicate with the house by which I came in. It's an old caravanserai and practically deserted as far as I could make out. Simonou may be there. But we'll have to risk that . . .'

'Simonou?'

He smiled at her.

'You've got into queer company,' he said. 'But I'll tell you about it some other time. Look! It seems quiet enough!'

She stared up at the window in which she had seen Nadia Alexandrovna. The lamp that had burned there was extinguished now and the whole building was wrapped in darkness. The house which they had left, on the other hand, was clamorously astir. The door of the harem yet held, to judge by the blows that reverberated through the gaping *mashrabiyeh* of the balcony; but mingled with them was a splintering sound that was of bad augury. The galleries buzzed with the hubbub of many voices and lights moved to and fro.

But Cradock was imperturbable. He was peering over the right-hand side of their roof. He turned. She saw that he was unwinding his girdle.

'I'll have to let you down,' he remarked. 'I only

hope there's a door below. It's impossible to see anything in this light.'

His sash was of white Damietta silk, heavy and very long. He passed one end round her slender corsage and made a running knot. The clamour in the house was terrifying, but the quiet smile never left his face. As Jean looked at him, she told herself that this was never her sombre fellow-passenger of the Aquatic. The bitterness had fled from his face: there was a good-humoured sparkle in the deep blue eyes, and he even joked with her.

'You're not exactly dressed for mountaineering, are you?' he said. 'But I'll be as gentle as I can. Hullo, the door's down!'

A wild roar from the chamber above them proclaimed the fact. Cradock betrayed no excitement. He was showing Jean how he proposed to lower her. 'Let yourself go and don't struggle,' he said. 'Keep yourself away from the wall with your hands and feet!'

Dexterously and gently he let her down. The sash cut into her body even through the heavy cloth of silver of her gown, but it was not for long and presently she was on the ground gazing up at the tall, dim figure above her head. Cradock's long legs encased in baggy white trousers appeared over the ledge of the roof, his powerful arms took the strain, he remained suspended for an instant, then let himself drop. With a hollow sound he landed at her side. A slender cold hand gripped his wrist as he scrambled erect. Jean was looking up. He followed the direction of her eyes. From a window above them a dark face, shining in the yellow lamplight, peered down through the shattered woodwork.

'Don't look up,' Cradock whispered in her ear.

'Your face shows white in the dark. Keep your head down!'

He drew her gently into the damp dark shadow under the lee of the wall. Then he looked about him; and the first thing he saw was a door.

Four high walls hedged in the little court, blank save on the side facing them where the monotony was broken by this door. It was a little door, squat and weather-beaten, a pygmy among doors, wearing, too, with its rough-hewn timbers, something of the wrinkled and frowish air of a dwarf. The court was small and square and stuffy, buried among the stale warm odours and sickly emanations of the Arab quarter like a hole in a dust-heap. Rubbish was scattered about the filthy pavement, and, when Cradock noticed it, for the first time his face was troubled.

A heavy thud resounded above them, another and then another. The wall at their backs quivered. In obedience to her companion's injunction, Jean kept her face to the ground; but she knew that the natives were springing from the window in pursuit. Now she could hear their naked feet pit-patting on the roof above. Fortunately the court was very dark . . .

Cradock's lips brushed her ear. 'Wait . . .' he told her. He glided across the court to the little door. He flattened himself against the wall and with his hand felt for the thumb-piece of the iron latch. He pressed it down and gently pushed. The door remained fast. It was locked . . .

Above his head he could now hear bare feet padding about the house-tops. Suddenly a white turban projected from the roof above where Jean was crouching. It was too dark to discern the face it surmounted, but

the turban remained there for a full minute as though the wearer were peering down into the void. Then the turban vanished and Cradock flashed across the court again. Jean turned her head and her eyes posed a mute question. She read the reply in Cradock's grave face.

'We must wait,' he whispered. Within him he was thanking God that the night was moonless. But if the clouds should pass, those clouds that so mercifully obscured the stars, they must infallibly be detected.

And then from above a cry, a loud, triumphant cry, rang out. A ray of bright light pierced the darkness about them. This time Cradock looked boldly up. A brilliant beam fell full on his face. A native stood on the house-top above them with an electric torch in his hand. And he was pointing downward bawling discordantly for his friends. At the same instant there was a light touch on Cradock's arm.

'Look!' said Jean.

Cradock followed her pointing finger.

Across the court the little door stood open.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE WOMAN WHO FEARED TO LOVE

The most exciting moments in life pass very swiftly. They are like the lights of a station through which you thunder in an express. They produce little impression in detail at the time. They leave a vivid memory; but it is blurred. Only afterwards in retrospect, fragmentary pictures, caught in passing, emerge and gradually piece together a whole.

As, at the end of that eventful night, Jean Averil crept into bed, her mind was thronged with memories, a *Todtentanz* of dreadful shapes. All the terrors of the world seemed to have gathered there for refuge, a *Cour des Miracles* of frightening images. She lay long awake, watching the stars above the hotel garden pale before the coming of the dawn, slowly weaving to and fro the web of those crowded hours she had spent between her setting forth with Nadia Alexandrovna in Prince Said Hussein's car and her return to the hotel under Cradock's escort as the vestibule clock marked two.

She remembered their scurry through the little door, a dark passage that her imagination had peopled with lurking black figures, and then a vast abandoned courtyard, and their stealthy exit through a gate into a quiet lane. All about them the night was awake with the murmur of voices, the rustle of feet, the hubbub of gathering crowds. But the lane — she retained this detail perfectly: she carried a picture in her mind of Cradock's turbaned head peering round the gate — was empty.

Then had followed an endless silent course through byways and narrow streets, she in her companion's black over-garment, which he had stripped off and flung about her to conceal her silver dress, Cradock at her side in the white blouse and baggy trousers of the Egyptian peasant, with shaggy night-watchmen, grasping their staves, eyeing them suspiciously from under the lamps at the street corners: a belated cab that Cradock had intercepted on a wide boulevard; and then rest, rest and respite from utter exhaustion, weariness of mind as of body, rest and drowsiness as, on rubber-shod wheels, they bowled homeward through the silent, shuttered streets.

They had parted at Shepheard's. At the foot of the terrace he had held her a minute to question her about the events of the night. 'Forgive me,' he had said, 'I know that you're dreadfully tired. But this is urgent.' Briefly she had told him of the dinner, of the fortune-teller's arrival, of Hussein's absence, of his violence when he had returned.

Had she seen anything of Simonou? Cradock asked. She shook her head. Had there been any mention of him? No. Had she heard the name of Said Hussein's visitor? When she shook her head again, and before she could frame a word of thanks, Cradock had left her abruptly, leapt into the cab, and driven off into the night.

He was tireless, tireless and nerveless, a man all of steel. His face seemed to contemplate her now out of the shadows about the bed, the features drawn by fatigue, but the eyes undimmed, gallant and loyal and watchful, his mouth grim with determination. How surely he had piloted her through the dangers of the night, never downcast, never at a loss . . . !

Through all the shifting pictures that flitted across her mind, the squat door of the little court projected. She seemed to see it standing wide with a great interrogation mark across the opening. It had been shut. She had seen Cradock start as his hand tried the latch: she had marked the drop in his voice when, returning to her side, he had said: 'We must wait!' It had been shut. And then it had been open. Who had left them this way of retreat?

She would ask 'Dave.' Drowsily her mind snatched comfort from the whispered name. There was so much she had to ask him. Would she see him again? She wondered, and, wondering, fell asleep . . .

The days passed. Jean spent much time at the hospital with Simmons. Like all whose life lies in a narrow groove, her Abigail was miserable away from the daily routine of her duties and she insisted on Jean bringing needlework for her to do whilst she lay in bed. Only the knowledge that her release from hospital depended on it steeled her to the ordeal of exposing her emaciated person to the doctor's hypodermic needle. She submitted with a sort of grim reluctance to the operation and, as a check on the natural bent of all foreigners towards trickiness, kept on a piece of paper under her pillow a private tally of the injections, sternly resolved, when the appointed six had fought their bacilli-destroying way into her veins, to take up her bed and walk.

Cradock did not reappear. He did not even telephone for news. There was no word of the Prince, no word of Simonou, no word of Nadia Alexandrovna. In vain Jean scanned the English and French newspapers

published in Cairo for any reference to a disturbance in the Arab quarter. She could not make it out. Were there no police reporters in this city?

In her dilemma she thought of Bastable. He was something in the Government and a friend of Cradock's. She could ask him to lunch with her and discreetly sound him. She got the hotel telephonist to ring up his flat; but the girl was referred to his office. At his office it was stated that he was away for several days.

And then one evening — it was about ten days after her return from Luxor — a shadow fell across her book as she sat reading in the Moorish lounge after dinner. She raised her eyes. Cradock stood before her.

He was wearing a dinner-coat. It gave him a very presentable appearance, she told herself, remembering that she had never seen him in evening dress before. On the boat he had seemingly disdained this homage to civilised usage. But she found him looking tired and wan. He appeared to have lost something of his tan and his face was pale and thinner than ever.

'I'm going back to Luxor to-morrow,' he said, rather awkwardly. 'I just thought I'd look in and see how you were . . .'

She felt the embarrassment between them. It was abominable, she told herself, that he had not called on her before. But he was not like other men: he had little use for convention. Besides, he owed her no civility and she was so greatly in his debt. Therefore she softened towards him and said with a smile:

'That was nice of you. I was afraid you weren't going to give me the opportunity of thanking you for rescuing me the other night . . .'

He reddened like a boy.

'But do sit down,' she said to cover his embarrassment. 'And won't you have a drink?'

He refused a drink, but took a chair.

'You must think me a perfect fool,' she said, 'for going to dine alone like that in the native quarter with an Egyptian and only that woman for chaperon' — she felt his eyes rest curiously on her face. 'But I thought we were going to the Prince's . . . to Said Hussein's house. I found out only at the last moment that we were to dine in the Arab city. And then I didn't like to back out.'

'You couldn't be expected to know the sort of man he is,' Cradock answered. 'He makes a good bluff of being the polished European, but scratch him and the Orient sticks out a foot.'

'But what have you done about it? What's happened?'

'Come out into the garden,' said Cradock. 'I can't talk here.'

She smiled to herself as she rose, wrapping her shawl about her, to follow him. Another man would have said, 'Do you mind coming out in the garden?' or, 'What about going outside?' But Dave spoke to her as one man to another.

They passed through the swing-doors beyond the grill-room corridor and walked out under the stars. The night was warm and still. The fronds of the palms were black against the glittering canopy overhead and between them were visible, through the railings at the bottom of the garden, the coloured lamps of the brasserie across the street that ran down one side of the hotel. From the lighted windows of the grill came the strains of the band.

'Hussein's disappeared,' said Cradock gloomily. 'Simonou, too. After I left you that night, I went to the police, got a car and a squad of men and returned to the house. The place was empty. Every man-jack of them had cleared.'

'But what,' asked Jean, 'was the connection between Said Hussein and Mr. Simonou?'

'Contraband in antiques. Simonou was Hussein's jackal. For months the Egyptian Government has been on the track of an immense organisation, covering virtually every excavation site in Egypt, for the theft of antiques. It had its agents everywhere. They were among the diggers — my man, Ali, was one: they travelled round among the *fellaheen* in the villages: they blackmailed the dealers.

'It was a reign of terror. No man dared resist it; for its intelligence service was remarkable. If ever a complaint was laid with the Antiquities Service, the complainant inevitably disappeared, and weeks after, maybe, his body would be found on the Mokattam Hills or floating down the Nile. The head of this organisation was known as Mr. Ramosi.'

They had reached the end of the path. Some garden chairs were set round a table there in the black shadow of a great *dôm* palm. They sat down.

'The house in which you dined that night purported to belong to one Osman el Maghraby, who described himself as Said Hussein's man of affairs. He was in reality, as papers in our possession prove, Mr. Ramosi's Cairo agent. Simonou was head of the intelligence service and a man called Voronian, secretary. Osman el Maghraby's house abutted on a deserted caravanserai — you remember the yard by which we escaped? —

and communicated with it by a door through one of the galleries. On the first floor of the caravanserai, in a fireproof room with an iron door, we discovered a wonderful collection of antiques, some in steel cupboards, others packed ready for export. The books of the Ramosi organisation were there, too. But the one conclusive proof we require to identify its head was missing!'

'What was this proof?'

'The statuette of Anubis.'

'The figure that was stolen that night I spent in your house?'

He nodded. 'I meant them to take it,' he told her.

'That's what Colin said. But why?'

'We wanted to find out where the things were going. We had to catch them red-handed with the goods. We cannot prove that a single one of all those beautiful things in el Maghraby's house is stolen because every one has been filched from excavations or dug up by peasants on the land. That has been our difficulty all through. So I got the Cairo Museum to lend me this statuette — it was only discovered a month ago by one of the Department's excavation units and nothing is known of it outside the Service; and planted it in my dig for our friend, Ali, to steal. Simonou should have been at the mosque to receive it, but he was late and the messenger, mistaking you for him in the dark, gave it to you. I allowed them to recover it: it came back into Simonou's hands and I tracked him with it from Luxor to that caravanserai adjoining el Maghraby's house. And there, like a bungler, I lost the trail. The Museum can whistle for its statuette and I have failed in my mission.'

'Then the statuette was not with the other things?'

'No! They cleared out in such a hurry that they left the books and everything behind them. But they took the statuette. And my last chance of identifying Mr. Ramosi has gone.'

'But what became of Mr. Simonou?'

'He must have taken a little passage on the ground floor that I missed in the dark. It leads to a room which, from your description, I imagine to be the one in which you left Hussein after you had seen the fortune-teller. I presume that Simonou met Hussein there, handed over the statuette, and, now that the jig's up, has vanished with the rest.'

Jean did not speak for an instant. Various little things came back to her, Hussein's refusal to meet Simonou on the boat, Simonou in Hussein's car, the Greek's odd manner that morning when she had met him on the canal-bank at Luxor.

'You mean to say, then, that Said Hussein is Mr. Ramosi?' she asked.

'It can be nobody else,' Cradock replied sombrely. 'But we must have proof. And the proof has vanished. So to-morrow I go back to my digging!'

There was a moment's silence. Then Jean said:

'I suppose Hussein always intended that I should come to that house?'

'Of course. He used it for business that he wanted to keep from the light of day.'

She was silent for a moment, thinking. Then she raised her eyes to Cradock's face and paused, hesitating.

'What is it?' he asked.

'I was wondering,' she said slowly, 'about you . . . and Madame Alexandrovna . . . in that room?'

He looked sharply at her.

'You saw us?'

She nodded.

'Through the screen. But only for a moment,' she added. Then, observing that he remained silent, she said:

'I was wondering whether Madame Alexandrovna knew why Said Hussein wanted me to dine in that house.'

'No!' Cradock answered promptly.

'You seem very sure?'

'She has been Hussein's mistress for years.'

'*You* seem to know her pretty well!'

She glanced at him from under her lashes. His face was impassive.

'Until the other night,' he answered gravely, 'I had not set eyes on her for years — for twelve years.'

And then she understood. The tears started in her eyes.

'Oh,' she faltered, 'I didn't know . . I never realised . . .' She stopped and looked at him. 'Then Said Hussein . . .' she began.

He nodded. 'Don't blame her,' he said. 'She had no money and a woman has to live. If she'd asked me, I'd have given her all I had. But I was young and I never realised. I'm sorry for her with that beast.'

'Then she's gone with him?'

He nodded. She put out her hand.

'It's dreadfully hard on you,' she said.

He smiled rather wistfully. 'I'm over it now,' he returned. 'When I looked at Nadia the other night, I knew that the past was dead and buried.'

He had stood up as though to take his leave, and now she rose from her chair.

'Men are like that,' she said. 'They find it easy to forget.'

He bowed his head. 'Don't you?' she asked. He looked away. In the hotel the band was playing 'La Violetera.' The melody, with its odd tango beat, drifted over the warm stillness of the garden.

'I'm taking back to Luxor,' he answered slowly, 'a memory that will be harder to forget than the pain of twelve years ago.' He paused, then added simply: 'It's the memory of you.'

He turned and faced her.

'From the moment that I held you in my arms that night on the Aquatic,' he said, 'I've loved you. Night and day, you've been in my thoughts. It's because I knew it from the first that I've been ill-mannered and ill-bred with you, trying to fight down this madness of mine. I didn't mean to come here to-night, but I had to see you once more before I went away. I can't tell you about it in the way a woman expects a man to make love to her. I don't know how to, and anyway you wouldn't listen. That night on the verandah of my house you were offended because you thought that I was making love to you. I never meant to tell you this, but, now that we are going our different ways, I don't want you to think of me, if ever I come into your mind, as one who crossed your path and amused himself by making love to you like the rest. There has been only one woman in my life up to this and, but for you, there would never have been another. And you stand there and tell me it's easy to forget. My God, if only I could . . .'

He broke off. She was looking at him and her eyes were full of tears.

'I'm sorry for breaking out like this,' he murmured. He put out his hand. 'Good-bye.'

She disregarded his hand. Her eyes were fixed on his face.

'Listen to me,' she said. 'I, too, care enough for your good opinion of me to want you to think kindly of me. I've been odious to you, catty and spiteful and blind . . . no, it's true . . . and it's my fault that you failed in your mission, for if I hadn't been so foolish you would never have had to get me out of that house. You told me once that you were afraid of me. You meant afraid of love. Well, so am I! There has been only one man in my life, and that was my husband. I suppose I was in love with him; at any rate, I was desperately fond of him. I was not much more than a girl when I married him and he was handsome, and . . . and attentive and . . . and loving to me. I trusted him, well . . . as one would trust God. I thought that he was mine and I his, sharing our lives, with no secrets between us . . .'

Her voice began to tremble. A tear brimmed over and made a wet mark on her cheek. Cradock grew distressed.

'Please,' he pleaded, 'why do you tell me this? It only pains you . . .'

'I've got to tell you so that you will understand,' she said. 'After we had been married for three years and one month, my husband was killed in an automobile smash. His car skidded on a road in the Adirondacks and fell into a ravine. When I got the news, I couldn't understand what he was doing there; for he had left me to go and see his lawyer in Chicago. Beside him under the car they found the dead body of a woman. She was his mistress. She lived in a villa at Lake

Placid. He paid the rent — I saw the cheques; he frequently visited her there — I talked with the servants — when he was supposed to be playing polo or away on business over the week-end. She had been his mistress before his marriage, and less than a year after, he went back to her . . .'

She paused and bit her lip.

'I've tried to make allowances,' she went on with a little catch in her voice. 'Men have temptations, I know. But after that, where is the man I can trust? That night on the boat, when I saw you for the first time, I felt about you what afterwards you said about me, that you looked like a good friend. And you've proved yourself a good and true friend to me When you are with me, I feel that I am safe with you, that you would never let me down. But then the memory of the past overwhelms me and I say to myself, "Never, never again" . . . .'

He had taken her hands and drawn her to him. Now his arms were about her.

'Jean,' he whispered, 'let me try and make good the past.'

For an instant she rested passive in his arms. Her wet eyelashes brushed his cheek. Then she sighed and gently drew away.

'My dear,' she said, 'it can never be . . .'

'Give me a little hope,' he pleaded. 'Let me come back and ask you when you are beginning to forget.'

'I can't forget,' she answered brokenly. 'I never shall forget. And I should never make you happy.'

'Then . . . it's good-bye?'

'It's good-bye.' Her voice was not very steady. 'Think kindly of me . . . David!'

He stood before her, twisting his hands. 'I suppose it's useless . . .' he began.

She inclined her head slowly. She heard his step on the gravel. When she looked up, he had gone. From the grill-room the haunting strains of 'La Violetera' floated caressingly over the garden.

'Señors, pour vos Señoritas
Des mains de la Carmencita
Acceptez ces violettes.
C'est du bonheur qu'on achète
Le Bon Dieu le vous rendra!'

The swing-door rumbled as it revolved and the band finished on a final flourish. Slowly she sank to her knees in the darkness under the palm and sobbed bitterly into her handkerchief.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE PROOF

David Cradock's confession to Jean Averil had been made on the spur of the moment. As he told her, he had not meant to speak; indeed, he had himself scarcely been aware of the strength of the surging tide that beat against the defences of his heart. When a man has lived alone with his thoughts as long as he had, he loses his sense of values; and he had not admitted to himself the true state of his feelings towards her until the involuntary declaration of his love had forced him to realise it.

But now, as he strode back along the broad pavements of the Sharia Kamel towards his hotel, his eyes were opened. He knew that, since first he had looked into her face that night on board the Aquatic, he had lived from hour to hour only in the hope of seeing it again. If he had thrown himself with the whole of his energy into the investigation of the Ramosi case; if he had gone without food and sleep to follow up each clue, it had been — now he avowed it to himself frankly — less to justify Bastable's confidence in him than to try and put from his mind the serene regard of two gentle grey eyes that haunted him day and night.

For the first time since his great disaster something like despair had once more laid hold of him. He was like a man that in middle life loses his fortune and has to set to work and build it up again. His fortune had been his peace of mind that, in his mountain hermitage

at Luxor, he had painfully reconquered. And now it was gone. He had lost his heart. He had failed in his mission.

His work awaited him. He must take it up again — the long days in the heat of the mountain-side with only natives to talk to, the endless nights in the silence of the hills with only his thoughts for company. He found himself gazing down a bourneless vista of lonely years. And he quailed at the prospect.

As he entered the hotel vestibule, the night porter handed him a letter. Cradock did not even look at it. He thrust it into his pocket and made for the lift. He was going to Luxor by the early morning train and he had much to do before he left Cairo, papers to sort out, his report for Bastable to draw up.

The night porter ran after him as he crossed the hall. They were friends of many years standing. In some respects the great Cairo hotels are a good deal like London clubs. Their porters are institutions whose memory for names and faces often supplies the lack of an Egyptian *Who's Who.* Their acquaintanceship with the cosmopolitan society of the banks of the Nile extends from the Delta to the confines of Kordofan. They know all the secrets and all the scandals.

'Mr. Cradock!'

David Cradock swung round. Discreetly the porter lowered his voice. 'There's a lady been enquiring for you, sir. She asked particularly to be told as soon as you came in.'

'A lady, Ziegli?' Cradock's voice was tired and listless. His eyes abstractedly searched the honest Swiss face. 'Who is it?'

The man's features were a mask. His ready tact had

set a watch upon them. Not for the gift of a chalet and a vineyard on the slopes of his native mountains would he have suffered the other to divine his familiarity with that old affair that once upon a time had set all tongues in Cairo wagging for a week, particularly the bitter, slanderous tongues of Gezira, the island in the Nile where the English officials live. A wit has described it as a piece of land entirely surrounded by water and inhabited exclusively by ladies and gentlemen.

'Madame Alexandrovna, sir,' he replied.

If Cradock experienced any emotion at the announcement, he suppressed it. His face was as inscrutable as the porter's.

'Where is she?' he asked.

'In the bar, sir.'

Save for the mixer in his tarbush behind the long counter with its gleaming brass rail, the bar seemed to be empty as Cradock entered it. Then across the big room he saw Nadia. She was sitting pensively in a club chair in the far corner. A cigarette was between her fingers and there was a little pile of stubs in the ash-tray at her elbow. She was wearing a dark tailor-made suit and a little black cloche hat. She sprang up as Cradock stood beside her.

'They told me you were returning to Luxor in the morning,' she said. 'I had to see you before you left.' She was very pale and she had an air of suppressed excitement. He made her sit down and took the chair beside her.

'You look worn out,' he said. 'I'm going to get you a whisky-and-soda.' He clapped his hands and the barman came over.

She protested that she would take nothing. But he

insisted and gave the order. She sat smoking in silence until they were served and the barman had returned to his post.

Cradock made her drink. He was very gentle with her. 'Have you had any dinner?' he asked.

'*Mais si!* I dined on the train. I got back from Alexandria only this evening. I have been waiting here for you since half-past nine. Listen to me, David! You would like to find Hussein, *n'est-ce pas?*'

Cradock looked intently at her. 'Do you know where he is?' he asked.

She did not answer the question. In a low and passionate voice she suddenly exclaimed: 'Ah, *la canaille! Le mufle!*' Tears strangled her.

Cradock took her hand. 'Nadia,' he said softly, 'don't give way like that. Tell me about it!'

Forlornly she wiped her eyes on a little square of cambric.

'He's abandoned me,' she sobbed. 'I daren't go back to my hotel. The bill has not been paid for weeks. I begged him to make me an allowance, but he never would. Every time I wanted money I had to ask him for it. And now, when he has no further use for me, he runs off and leaves me like . . . like *une fille quelconque!* But no man shall treat me so! Ah, *non, par exemple!*'

She broke off gasping.

'That night you met me — the night the American woman was there — they deserted me in that house,' she went on presently. 'After you left me, I was frightened and I went downstairs and hid. When I came out, the place was empty. Hussein, Simonou, Voronian — they were all gone. I had to find my way alone through the native quarter until I got a cab and then I drove

to Hussein's palace. He had been there and fetched away some luggage. But he had left no word for me. I did not dare return to the hotel, on account of the bill, you understand, so I went to a friend's for the night.

'The next day I took the train for Alexandria. Hussein keeps his yacht there and I guessed he had made for it. But the Belle Brise was not in the port, and of Hussein, no trace. Everywhere I enquire without result until yesterday I meet a Frenchwoman I used to know. Her friend is a Greek who occupies himself with the outfitting of yachts. In great secrecy he had been asked to supply provisions for a vessel that lay in a creek up the coast. The name was the Belle Brise. But a man has no secrets from his *bonne amie, allez*, and Claudine — that's my friend's name — knew all about the affair.'

'Is the yacht still there?' asked Cradock.

'She sailed five days ago for Marseilles.'

He frowned, perplexed.

'But I,' said Nadia, 'I can tell you where Hussein is making for . . .'

Cradock looked up quickly.

'He told Claudine's friend that he intended to spend some months on the Riviera. And that means the Villa Scarabée . . .'

He gazed at her expectantly and she gave a rather bitter laugh.

'You never thought that Nadia would be able to help you, did you, David?' she said.

'But where is this Villa Scarabée?'

'It is at La Bocca, outside Cannes. It is supposed to belong to Simonou, but in reality it is Hussein's. That

is where you will find him, David. He can't go far; for without his business he will soon reach the end of his money. He is *criblé de dettes*. His great fortune — it is a bluff! He has long since spent what he inherited from his father!'

'I know,' said Cradock.

'*Alors*, you go to have him arrested, *n'est-ce pas?*' she demanded eagerly.

Cradock shrugged his shoulders.

'*Va*,' she cried with a little coaxing air, 'be not so discreet with me, *mon petit* David! I know very well why the Egyptian Government interests itself to discover where is Said Hussein. Oh, *la, la!* The Egyptian Government, *je m'en fiche pas mal:* the Department of Antiquities, it is the same; and if it has amused this *sale Oriental* to collect his mummies and his *figurines* and . . . and *je ne sais pas quoi*, under the noses of the inspectors and of the excavators, I say nothing. But when this *animal*, this *crétin*, this *voyou* treats me like *la dernière des filles, alors*, I and the Government, it is like one. I'll teach him! Ah, *ça, oui!*'

Her green eyes flashed fire and she ground her white teeth together.

'He thinks himself clever, this Hussein. Because this house and the *okella* adjoining belong to el Maghraby, "I have nothing to do with it," he tells himself. Because there is no one who shall say he knew that these antiquities of his were stolen, the Government can do nothing, he believes. *Eh bien!* let him take care!'

Her manner changed. She was all softness when she spoke again.

'You will send to the Villa Scarabée at La Bocca, outside Cannes and arrest him, *n'est-ce pas, dîtes*, David?'

Cradock's face was troubled.

'There's no proof,' he rejoined. 'You've just said it yourself . . .'

She dropped her voice and bent her head to his.

'And if I gave you this proof?'

There was a moment's silence. There was an eagerness in her voice that the man misunderstood. He slipped a hand inside his coat and pulled out a cheque-book and a fountain pen.

'In the first place,' he said in a business-like way, 'how much do you owe your hotel?'

She gave a little start and quickly averted her head. Her hands plucked at her dress.

'You have the right to think that of me,' she murmured in a low voice that shook a little. 'But I don't want money, David.' She raised herself erect and faced him. 'I want revenge!' And she stamped her foot.

'I beg your pardon,' he said humbly. 'I should have known.' And he thrust cheque-book and pen back into his pocket. She put her hand down beside her chair and lifted an attaché-case onto the arm. She opened it and withdrew a package enveloped in a silken cloth.

'Nadia!' cried Cradock.

'Your proof, *la voici!*' She unknotted the cloth and displayed the statuette of Anubis.

'But how did you get hold of it . . .' Cradock began.

'Listen!' she said. 'Simonou brought it to the house. In his presence Hussein told me to carry it upstairs to the store where he keeps his treasures. But I was angry because he wanted me to go home and leave the American woman alone with him. So I didn't obey him at once. I waited in the packing-room to see what was going to happen. And then you came . . .'

'Do you mean to say you had the statuette with you when I appeared?' demanded Cradock.

'Yes. It stood on the table beside me. When the American woman screamed out, I guessed what was happening and, instead of putting the statuette in the store, when I ran to hide I took it with me. I meant to use it to force Hussein to give this woman up.'

She placed the package in Cradock's hands.

'Take it,' she said. 'Use it against him and ruin him. You have no cause to love him, David, *va!*'

She stood up and gathered her fur stole about her shoulders. She held out her hand.

'Good-bye, my friend,' she said. She paused and added wistfully: 'I'd like to hear you say, before I go, that you have forgiven me. I've been punished, David: believe me, I've been punished.'

He kept her hand in his.

'That's all over now,' he told her gently. 'But what are you going to do? Where are you going?'

'My friend will put me up for a night or two,' she answered. 'After that' — she shrugged her shoulders, '*on verra . . .*'

'Listen,' he said. 'Do you want to leave Egypt?'

Her eyes sparkled. 'If only I could! If you knew how I detest this country . . .'

'Go to your friend's to-night! The police have been enquiring at your hotel and it might be disagreeable for you. In the morning call on my friend, Mr. Bastable. I will give you a card to him. You will have to repeat word for word what you have told me to-night, do you understand? And listen! He will settle your hotel bill and give you your fare back to Europe and something for the expenses of the voyage . . .'

'Do you mean it?' she cried.

'Yes,' he answered. 'You have rendered the Government a service, and anyway, it is best and safest for you to leave Egypt. Wait!' He was busy with his pen. 'There you are! I've put down the address. Now where shall you be to-night in case we want to get hold of you in a hurry?' He made a note of the address she gave. 'Bastable will expect you in the morning. I'm going to ring him up at his house about it to-night.'

Silently she took the card and tucked it away in her bag.

'I'll see you into a cab,' he said. But she shook her head. Her lambent green eyes softened as they plunged their regard into his.

'Many times before we met in this room, David,' she said. 'Let it be here that we say good-bye. I do not think that we see each other any more. I hope that soon at last you will be happy . . . with the woman that you love!'

She had guessed his secret. He read it in her eyes. He did not speak, but she answered the question that was in his mind to ask.

'That night . . . at the *okella*. I saw how you looked at her when you were together in the little court.'

'Then it was you who opened the door?'

She nodded. She put her small hands on his shoulders, drew him down to her, and kissed him lightly on the forehead. Then she slipped away. Cradock was left staring moodily at the statuette of Anubis, as it stood on the table between the ash-tray and the siphon, gleaming dully through its silken wrapping.

The first thing he did, after Nadia's departure, was to

mount to his bedroom and lock the statuette away in his dressing-case. Something crackled in his pocket as he stooped, and, investigating the cause, he found the letter which the night porter had handed him on entering the hotel.

It was a note from Bastable.

Simonou's dead body was taken out of the Nile at the Barrage this afternoon. Poisoned. Ring me up as soon as you come in.

CHAPTER XXV

WHEREIN JEAN AVERIL GOES WALKING WITH ROMANCE

JEAN AVERIL was packing. That is to say, arrayed in a becoming blue kimono, she stood and surveyed with some dismay her wardrobe which occupied most of the available space in her bedroom. Presses, chests of drawers, and trunks had been emptied and their contents spread out on the bed, the couch, the chairs, the table. In the midst of it all was Jean, her young brow wrinkled with care, her chin propped on her hand, in an attitude of thought.

A woman surveying her wardrobe at the end of a season is not unlike a general reviewing his troops at the close of a campaign. To each dress, as to each battalion, memories attach; for to a woman it is given to revive the past through the medium of her frocks. A man's clothes are his chattels like his stick or his pipe: a woman's gowns are her companions. To recall an event a man will give a date: a woman will say: 'It was the day I wore my black and coral.'

So Jean, as she gazed upon all the pretty things about her, lived over once again in memory the eventful days that had passed since she took ship for Egypt. There lay her golden 'robe Tut-ankh-Amen' which she had worn the night she had dined with Rachel Hannington at Monte Carlo, the night that, for the first time, she had seen David Cradock. Across the head of the couch was spread the white costume she had put on for the

Richboroughs' luncheon at the Semiramis when Bastable had told her a story. Her sea-green and silver brocade whispered snatches of the song of Bamba passionately breathed to the night in the Prince's starlit garden. here was her tussore riding-coat that told of Luxor and the glassy river, of the green cane and the glowing hills beyond, of a well-remembered long, low house and a verandah where she always seemed to see a lonely figure gazing out across the stony valley.

Memories, memories! They seemed to rustle in every fold of the cloth of gold, the brocade, the clinging crêpe de chine The silver frock that she had chosen for her last dinner with Hussein stared at her from the bed. The silver shoes, mud-stained, spoiled, spoke even more poignantly of the vicissitudes of that memorable night. It was as though the gown, huddled in one of those curiously lifelike attitudes that inanimate things sometimes assume, were a dead woman, a Jean Averil that had died.

The past rose up and her heart swelled within her. She turned away. Across a chair hung the simple black dress she had worn the evening — it was but two days since — that David Cradock had come to say good-bye. It was sleeveless as though the arms that had rested on his shoulders had been disintegrated to efface a memory the most anguishing of all. Jean seized the little gown and put it away in the wardrobe. She could bear the others, she could not support the sight of this. She closed the cupboard and remained before it pensive.

She was torn with doubts. That night, after Cradock had left her, she had dried her eyes and gone to bed determined to return to Europe as soon as Simmons came out of hospital in three days' time. She would go

to Paris, take a studio, and settle down seriously to study art. Anyway, in a month the Egyptian season would be ended: she did not care to stay in Cairo: the Sudan trip did not appeal to her; and if she went back to Luxor, she would be sure to meet David Cradock again.

But with the morning light indecision had assailed her. There was so much to be done to carry out this resolve to which she could not feel sure she had really made up her mind. Her trunks had to be packed, the hotel bill paid and a whole hierarchy of servants tipped, routes to be considered, passages for Simmons and herself to be booked. She decided to wait until Simmons was back. Then she would see. There was no particular hurry after all . . .

Then she had undergone a revulsion of feeling. She was shirking the decision, she told herself. Self-delusion had never been one of her failings. In her heart of hearts she realised the truth. She was loath to leave Egypt because she felt that her departure would make the breach between David and herself absolute. Well, she would have the courage of her convictions: she would be strong enough to put the sea between him and her. She arrived at this determination as she sat in her bedroom after dinner. That night she stayed up late emptying wardrobes and trunks, intending to spend the following morning in packing.

The next day came and found her more undecided than ever. There is an awesome air of finality about the operation of packing, and to Jean, as she faced the ordeal, it seemed as though her heart were of lead. As she stood among her frocks, each with its whispered word of David, she asked herself for the hundredth time whether she loved him. She could not find the answer;

but she knew that she thought of him always and it seemed to her that she would think of him for ever.

Perhaps the sight of her silver frock recalled it, but as she stood, torn with indecision, before the wardrobe, the utterance of Sheikh Abdullah, the fortune-teller, came into her mind. He had compared her to a man with a treasure. Once he had lost it, so the allegory had run, but he had recaptured it and held it safe again. Two men approached to steal it, one bearing gifts, the other sorrow. The latter carried off the treasure — how had the fortune-teller put it? — '*on a ship far across the seas.*'

With a feeling of eeriness she suddenly divined that the parable might in all seriousness apply to her. She had given her heart to Mark Averil and — after what infinite suffering? — recovered it. Said Hussein had courted her with gifts: he might have been the man against whom she was to be on her guard; and David Cradock was the sorrowful traveller who brought her sorrow. Had he stolen her heart? Her eyes were misty, and she gave her head a little shake as though to say that she did not know. But he had gone to Luxor. It was she who was to go '*on a ship far across the seas.*'

She cast her mind back to the scene in the old Arab house with the Sheikh, sprawling on the divan, talking his rapid guttural Arabic in his high and raucous voice. How had the prophecy finished? With the promise of peace. '*Long is the road of the grief-laden through the mountains of the place of burial. But the end of the journey is peace!*' That would seem to apply to Cradock. Or were both of them indicated? Did it mean that in the end they would find peace together?

She looked about her miserably. Why had she let

David go? She *must* see him again. Every fibre in her seemed to yearn for the comfort of his presence, his strength, his loyalty, his gentleness. She cast her kimono from her and pulled on one of her linen dresses. She would go back to Luxor that night: Simmons could join her there; she would seek out David and tell him frankly that she had been mistaken, that if he was still of the same mind . . .

Even as she dressed she knew she couldn't do it. It was not that she feared to humiliate herself before David: he was not the man to change. It was herself she was afraid of, the woman that looked out of her earnest grey eyes as she sat before the mirror and powdered her face for the street. Once before she had given her confidence to a man who had abused it and thrown it away. She might bring love, she could never bring trust, to marriage again.

Now that unpleasant mentor, Common Sense, had taken charge of her thoughts. She knew nothing of Cradock, or his family: he was probably a penniless adventurer, an English fortune-hunter. Once bit, twice shy, Jean Averil, and remember Rachel Hannington's warning . . . 'Unless you're strong-minded, one of these devils will get round you!' Pull yourself together, my dear! It's only the magic of the Egyptian nights that has bewitched you. Go back to Europe, put this man from your mind, and in six months you'll have forgotten all about him.

Thus Common Sense in Jean Averil's ear . . .

So briskly did she spring up from the dressing-table, so swiftly gather up her gloves and parasol and quit the disordered room that Common Sense, who is a leisurely person of settled habits with a strong dislike

for being rushed, was left behind. Thus it befell that, in place of this sober counsellor, Romance, quick to seize the opportunity, walked with Jean Averil through the noontide crowds of the Sharua Kamel.

When she had left Shepheard's, her mind was fully made up to go to Cook's and book her passage to Europe by the next available steamer. But Romance led her past all the shipping offices to the very door of Cradock's hotel. And there Romance abandoned her; for Common Sense, looking extremely cross, was visible plodding towards them.

Not fully realising why she had come there, Jean walked into the hotel and went up to the desk.

'Has Mr. David Cradock returned to Luxor, can you tell me?' she asked.

'No, Madame,' the porter replied. 'Mr. Cradock has left for Europe.'

For Europe! Then it was *he* that had gone 'on a ship far across the seas'!

'For Europe?' she repeated. 'When did he go?'

'Yesterday, Madame!'

The day after she had seen him!

'Has he gone to London, do you know?'

The porter consulted a book.

'To France, I think, Madame. The address he gave us was Poste Restante, Cannes!'

She went out into the sunshine with her mind made up and found Cairo fair and smiling. The day was radiant, the streets were full of people. She looked with interest at the shifting scene, suddenly alive again to the attraction of this strangest of cities where all the nations of the East rub elbows on the dusty sidewalks and four separate alphabets stare down bewilderingly

from the name-boards over the shops. A bridal procession straggled by with tossing banners, a blaring band in front, a file of battered carriages behind crammed with veiled women and peering tarbushed little boys. A man bestriding a camel passed beating a pair of kettle-drums slung across its hump to advertise a cinema.

At a crossing an Irish traffic policeman on point duty, very smart in tarbush and blue tunic, khaki breeches and gaiters, caught her eye as he held back a car for her and smiled a mouthful of gold teeth at her sunny face. She glanced radiantly at him and the Irishman wagged his head in silent approval of her dainty prettiness for the benefit of the sunburnt British corporal who was driving the car.

She went straight to Cook's. In the doorway she bumped into Molly Dalton and her father, a stolid person with a tweed cap and a pipe. Jean felt a little guilty. Molly had been in Cairo for three days and had twice telephoned the hotel.

'Jean, darling,' cried Molly, clasping her arms about her, 'I was wondering what had become of you. How long are you stopping on? We've just booked passages by the Messageries boat for Marseilles on Wednesday.'

'Is that the next steamer leaving for Europe?' asked Jean.

'Yes,' said Dalton *père*, and, with the precision of one who has made a life-study of time-tables, added: 'The P. & O. left Port Said at five o'clock this morning. The next steamer after the Messageries is the Lloyd Triestino on Friday.'

'Then,' remarked Jean serenely, 'if I can get accommodation it seems to me I'd better sail with you on Wednesday!'

'Oh, Jean, that'll be ripping!' exclaimed Molly. 'Colin's coming down to-morrow and he's dining with us at Mena House in the evening. You've jolly well got to come along, too!'

'My dear, I should love it!' Jean returned. 'Come on in with me and help me book my passage!'

Common Sense turned away disgusted. The two girls went in arm-in-arm with Romance. Common Sense had really no cause for complaint. Jean was following his counsel to the letter.

CHAPTER XXVI

TO DINNER AT LA BOCCA

Lady Rachel Hannington moved slowly through the gaming-rooms. It was a gala night and the Casino was very full. In one hand she held a packet of new mille notes, crisp under the band of the mint, in the other a gold bag, a cigarette-case, and a handkerchief.

She was an institution at Cannes and she knew it. When her Daimler appeared amid the autumn tints of the Croisette, the hotel-keepers opened their shutters and filled the flower-boxes, saying: '*Tiens*, Miladi Hannington! *Voici la saison qui recommence!*' When her big nose under its aureole of golden hair loomed in the revolving door of the *salles de jeux*, it was an event that gave the evening its special *cachet*. At her coming even the croupiers abandoned their wonted air of inspissated melancholy.

Her progress through the press was leisurely. She seemed to be acquainted with a good half of the elegant throngs gathered about the *chemin de fer* tables. At every turn people stopped to greet her. A King — pre-war and still in business — bowed over her hand as she bobbed and asked after her health. A Russian Grand Duke — likewise pre-war, but retired on the family jewels — kissed her fingers and made the original remark that the sunshine on the Riviera was delicious. A Greek money-lender waved to her from the twenty-thousand-louis table, pointing to the vacant place at his side. A sinuous Latin with a white camellia in the

button-hole of his dinner-coat, who was eagerly conversing with a slender and charming apparition in green, bowed devotedly.

'*Tiens*, Marchese!' said Lady Rachel, giving him her hand in passing. 'Back from Egypt?' She stopped dead. 'Jean Averil!' she exclaimed.

At her voice the girl in green looked up.

'Rachel!'

'Marchese,' Lady Rachel ordered, 'you are dismissed. I'm going to carry Mrs. Averil off. Wait, you may run along and find us two nice seats in the bar, at that table in the window, where we can talk away from this howling mob. And come and dine to-morrow, no, not to-morrow, the day after, Thursday. The Villa Eglantine, at nine. I shall make Mrs. Averil come, too. And we'll all talk about Egypt. *A rividerlo!*'

He bent over her hand and made towards the bar. Something that snuffled like a dog about the level of her elbow made Lady Rachel turn. It was her Greek friend, a stocky brown man with a nose like Cyrano and a face like a foreman of galley-slaves.

'I have kept you a place,' he said in French.

'A little later,' she told him. Then she linked her arm in Jean's and led her to the bar.

'And now,' she demanded when they were seated, 'where have you sprung from? When did you get here? Where are you staying? And why haven't you been to see me?'

'I came back from Egypt only on Sunday,' Jean replied. 'I'm at the Bella Vista. I was going to ring you up.'

'And how did you like Egypt?'

'Oh, all right. The sunshine was wonderful!'

Her voice was listless. Rachel Hannington studied her face for a moment.

'Did you see anything of Prince Said Hussein? I wirelessed him about you . . .'

'I know, my dear. It was sweet of you and I never wrote to thank you.'

'Nobody writes letters any more,' remarked Lady Rachel placidly. 'What with telephones and broadcasting I should think that writing would become one of the lost arts before very long. Attractive creature, the Prince, isn't he?'

'Very . . .'

'Do you know, Jeanie,' Lady Rachel observed, 'you're not looking quite up to the mark. You're as pretty as ever, but somehow you're changed. What have you been doing to yourself? Been having a very strenuous time in Egypt?'

'Fairly so. You know what Cairo is, Rachel . . .'

'I used to. But you ought to rest now. Though Cannes in the season' — she let her eyes wander along the line of black coats and bare backs hunched up on high stools at the counter — 'is scarcely the place. What made you come to Cannes? Are you with friends?'

'No. I'm just by myself with Simmons. I thought I would stay on the Riviera for a bit before going to Paris to get used to the change of climate. I'd never been to Cannes, though I know Nice and Monte, so I thought I'd like to try it . . .'

A little colour had crept into her pale cheeks.

'But you can't stay at an hotel by yourself. These great big rackety places are like madhouses in the season. You must come and stop with me . . .'

'It's sweet of you to want to have me, Rachel, but I believe I'll stay right where I am . . .'

'Nonsense . . .'

'I will really, I think. My plans are so uncertain: I don't know quite how long I shall be here: I may decide to go to Paris quite soon . . .'

'But, for Heaven's sake, child, you'll be quite free at the villa. And you can rest your nerves away from all this riff-raff. You've no idea how heavenly it is up there under the orange trees above La Bocca. I've the sweetest terrace you ever saw with the most entrancing view over the sea and the Esterils. You'd never guess you were only ten minutes by car from the Casino . . . and this!'

But Jean shook her head. 'Don't think I don't appreciate your kindness, Rachel,' she said. 'But I'm not going to inflict myself upon you. I don't think I'm very good company just now . . .

Rachel Hannington's eyes softened. 'Still grieving about Mark, Jeanie?'

Jean averted her eyes. 'I don't think about him any more,' she answered.

The older woman saw that the subject was painful and her ready tact came to the rescue. 'I just love your frock, Jeanie,' she remarked. 'I think it's perfectly charming.'

Jean looked herself over.

'Do you? It's a model I picked up on the Croisette this morning. They altered it to fit me. My dear, I'm simply in rags. I haven't a thing to put on. If I stay on here, I really shall have to buy some clothes.'

Rachel Hannington looked towards the entrance.

'My Greek corsair won't know what has happened

to me,' she remarked. 'We were going to share a bank. Did you ever see such a fearful-looking ruffian? He's fabulously wealthy and I must say he's a good loser. Listen, Jeanie: if you won't stay with me, you must come round and meet some people. Do you know anybody in Cannes?'

'I met some people from Philadelphia in the rue d'Antibes this afternoon. And there's that Italian who was speaking to me just now. He was on the Aquatic going out. And I believe I know a man from Egypt called Cradock who's staying here.' Her eyes flickered a nervous glance at Rachel Hannington's calm, plump face. 'Have you met him, Rachel?'

'One of the Barrasfords, is he?'

'I don't know. His name is Cradock, David Cradock.'

'I've heard of him, though I've never met him. I knew his elder brother, Herbert: he was killed with the Guards on the Somme. This one's an excavator, isn't he? I thought so. Said to be a marvellous Arabic scholar. I think he was out with the Arab levies in the war. Rather an eccentric person, they say! I didn't know he was in Cannes. Hullo, here's my corsair . . .'

Jean looked up. She did not see the Greek at once, but at the next table a man, sitting alone, was staring fixedly at her. He was a lean, hungry-looking creature in rather shabby evening clothes, with high cheek-bones that lifted the loose skin of his sallow face like poles propping up a canopy. With his shaggy eyebrows hanging over his piercing black eyes and his curved, thin nose he reminded her of a bird of prey.

But now, out of the throng round the bar entrance, Rachel Hannington's partner approached, rubbing his hands expectantly. Jean looked at her wrist. It was

half-past twelve. Lady Rachel was gathering up her impedimenta.

'I've got to go over to the Brockways at Cap d'Ail for the day to-morrow,' she said. 'But don't forget that you're coming to dine with me on Thursday, Jeanie. I'd better send the car for you: these *cochers* are so stupid. Come along and watch me break the bank. Now, then, Themistocles . . . !'

But Jean excused herself and, slipping away to the front entrance, sent the chasseur for a taxi to drive back to her hotel.

She hated Cannes, its clamour, its vulgarity. The overheated gaming-rooms, with the frieze of greedy faces round the tables leering through a haze of smoke, the vulpine-featured men, the painted women with their jewels and naked backs and *lamé* frocks, the Babel of the bar where, in post-war promiscuity, young girls and raddled prostitutes sat elbow to elbow, dangling silk-clad legs against the rungs of the high stools — the picture revolted her. She was no prude. She knew that all sorts of fish are dredged up in the nets of a Riviera casino, and in another mood the variety of the scene, the beauty of the dresses, the excitement of the play would have interested and diverted her.

But she was restless; and her restlessness made her captious. She was at Cannes, and, arrived, did not know why she had come. And yet, as she threaded the crowded rue d'Antibes or strolled along the wide curve of the Croisette in the sunshine, watching the waves thundering, white-crested, against the Reserve, she found herself searching the visages of the passers-by for a glimpse of blue eyes looking out of a sunburnt face.

They publish in Cannes a weekly register of visitors at the hotels. She bought it and spent a weary hour ploughing fruitlessly through columns of names. She went to the Casino in a vague hope that he might be there, a hope that was not fulfilled. If she had been certain of what she would tell him when they met, she would have written, for letters addressed to Poste Restante, Cannes, they had told her at his hotel in Cairo, would reach him. But could she answer the question he would surely ask her when, once more, they stood face to face? She felt she couldn't; and she didn't write.

She needed a *confidante*. She would have emptied her heart to Rachel Hannington; but Rachel, with her cynical views, she told herself, would never understand. Besides, of what use was advice? This was a question of principle which she must decide for herself.

She bought another frock for Rachel's dinner. She had taken a distaste for the evening gowns she had worn in Egypt. This was a simple affair in white georgette, pleated, plain, and therefore extremely expensive. 'Madame has the air of a bride,' said the trim *vendeuse* at the great *couturier's*, a corner of the rue de la Paix transplanted, for a few brief months, to the blue skies of the Côte d'Azur. Jean smiled bitterly. She had burnt her wedding dress when Mark Averil died.

But the girl was right, Jean confessed, as on the evening of the dinner she surveyed herself in the mirror before descending to the waiting car. The little frock gave her a young and virginal air. With her lissom figure, her straight brown hair, her clear grey eyes she looked like a *débutante*. She remembered her presenta-

tion at court in London, the white satin gown, the plumes in her hair, the line of cars down the Mall in the soft June night, and Mark waiting at the photographer's, when the ordeal was ended, to take her out to supper. She shuddered at the recollection, snatched up her ermine wrap, and ran to the lift.

The car glided swiftly along the Croisette, passed the lights of the Casino, and, skirting the port where the white yachts, moored in long lines at the quays, rode serenely at anchor, left the ruby gleam of the mole behind, and followed the Bocca road along the sea. In a little while it slackened speed and turning off gained a highway lined by the walls of villas embowered in trees. It slowed down again with the clang of gears to take a road that mounted abruptly under a canopy of foliage. Now they passed between two granite pillars and gravel spurted up under the tyres of the heavy limousine. Leaning forward, Jean saw a white house with green shutters revealed in the glare of the head-lamps.

Above the porch a window glowed, but the rest of the villa was in darkness. No other cars were drawn up on the drive outside the house. For once in a way, Jean told herself, she was the first to arrive.

The chauffeur helped her to alight. He had kept the engine running and, as soon as she had descended to the ground, he slammed the door of the car, jumped into the driving-seat, and glided round the drive to the back of the villa. An electric lamp winked into brightness under the porch. The front door opened silently. No servant was visible, so Jean walked in. The door closed behind her. She turned and saw a negro butler.

He was coal-black with tribal cuts on the cheek-bones

under the eyes. He was in evening dress; but he seemed curiously awkward in his clothes. As Jean looked at his swarthy, sullen face, it occurred to her that she had seen the man before.

A sudden sense of uneasiness came to her. Rachel Hannington might have a black butler, of course, but black butlers, in Europe as in America, were usually American negroes, smiling, officious, bustling persons, not clumsy, scowling savages like this. Had she come to the wrong house? Impossible: Rachel had sent her own car to fetch her.

Then a well-known voice behind her said:

'Good-evening, Mrs. Averil!'

She swung round in terror.

It was Said Hussein.

In panic she turned again to the door. The negro had placed himself in front of it.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE TRAP

She tried to master her nerves. She was telling herself that she must remain calm. But terror swept over her in great gusts until the little white vestibule swam about her and she felt sick with fright.

'How perfectly beautiful you look!'

She was not dreaming. The caressing voice was Hussein's. He stood at the foot of the staircase, very well-groomed in a Paisley silk smoking-jacket, one of the black pearls of his gleaming shirt-front just visible in the opening. He had clasped his hands together and, as she stood with heaving bosom and looked at him, he said again: 'Beautiful, beautiful!'

She drew her wrap about her, nerving herself to grapple with the situation.

'I must have come to the wrong house,' she said. 'This is not Lady Rachel Hannington's.'

'No,' he answered. 'But there is no mistake. I intended you to come here. It was I who sent the car.'

'Then will you please have it brought round at once and let me go on to my dinner?'

He shook his head. 'No!'

She paused before replying to steady her voice.

'I don't know what you want with me,' she said with a little gasp, 'but I cannot stay here. I must really ask you to be kind enough to send for the car.'

'No!' he repeated.

She turned about brusquely and made for the front

door. The black servant confronted her, standing stock-still before it like an image of ebony.

'Please tell your man to let me pass!' She was faltering now.

Said Hussein took a step forward.

'Jean,' he said, 'I brought you here because I wanted to talk to you. When I've said what I have to say, you can go if you want to.'

She faced him furious. Her throat was dry, her hands were like ice, but for the moment a wave of sudden anger swept her fears away.

'How dare you try and detain me against my will!' she demanded and stamped her foot. 'Open that door! Open that door, I say!'

He advanced towards her with a supplicating gesture.

'I know I'm behaving very badly. But I had to see you again and there was no other way.'

He spoke with a little air of apology, his voice ingratiating. But he did not deceive Jean Averil. She knew the Oriental that lurked beneath that smooth veneer.

'I never want to see you or speak to you again,' she cried. 'Will you understand that once and for all? And now please let me go.'

He made no sign, but stood there contemplating her with his odd hyena eyes. Her fears returned and quenched her anger. She joined her hands desperately and made a last appeal.

'You and I were friends once,' she faltered. 'If you are a gentleman, you'll let me go away. Please, please . . .'

His eyes were flushed with red. He came a step nearer. Her self-control gave way. 'Open the door!'

she cried frantically. 'Or I shall scream for help!' But he only shook his head.

'It's no use doing that,' he told her. 'There's only one other house within five hundred metres of this and that's been empty for months.'

A curtain parted at the end of the hall and a man appeared hastily. He had beady eyes glinting beneath tufted eyebrows and a bird-face that Jean had seen before. It was the man who had gazed at her so fixedly in the Casino bar on the previous evening. He must have overheard Rachel Hannington arranging to send the car for her. So that was how Hussein had tricked her to this house.

The newcomer stopped short when he saw Jean. He seemed to have come in from outside, for he wore a tweed cap, and an overcoat was loosely slung by the arms across his shoulders.

'Everything in order, Voronian?' the Prince demanded.

The man nodded. 'The motor-boat is lying off the rocks at the foot of the path over the railway.'

'You telephoned to Golfe Juan?'

'Yes. They've had steam up since four o'clock.'

'You can go. I'll ring when I want you.'

The man touched his forehead and shambled away through the curtain. Said Hussein turned to Jean.

'Come!' he said.

She shrank back. 'What do you want with me?'

'I've told you. I have something to say to you. We can't talk here. Come up to my room.'

She shook her head. 'Say what you want to say here and let me go!'

'Come!' he repeated. She remained motionless. But

he knew that he had won, for without speaking he turned and walked upstairs. She began to cry and then, with bowed head, followed him.

On the first landing a door faced the stairs. The Prince was waiting for her, holding the door. He ushered her into a dimly lit mauve room, lined with books to the ceiling, a desk in the middle with another door behind it. Hussein pointed to a black silk settee. On the desk a bottle of champagne and some glasses stood on a tray. He filled a glass and handed it to Jean. She shook her head and from the corner of the settee watched him with a sort of fascination as he replaced the glass of wine untouched on the tray and seated himself in the armchair at the desk. He lit a cigarette and then leaned forward on his arms looking at her.

'I've been a brute to you, little lady,' he said. 'But it's not been my fault. You bewitched me from the first. I get on with women as a rule. But you were different from the others. With you I never made any progress. We were good friends and nothing more. Every time I tried to get closer to the real woman in you, I found myself up against an ice-barrier. It maddened me, it made me desperate . . .'

He flicked the ash from his cigarette and contemplated its glowing end for a moment.

'I've loved many women in my life. But I never wanted one as I want you. You didn't realise, I suppose, that I was in love with you from the beginning? You didn't know what restraint I had to put upon myself sometimes on board the ship! That night you dined with the Richboroughs and the others at my house, when we walked in the courtyard after dinner — well, I had determined on that evening that you should

love me. I had tried to make love to you in your Western fashion, gradually, circumspectly, as though a woman were a blossom to wither at the touch and not a living creature with hot blood and a leaping heart in her even as a man. But your coldness did not thaw . . .

'I tested you with a gift, a trifling thing, but unique in its way. I have known Western women whose hearts an emerald would have unlocked. But again you defeated me . . .

'Many a time I have asked myself how I contrived to master my feelings in the gardens that night. Perhaps your very coldness disarmed me. But I know that after you were gone I paced the court until the morning came like . . . like a soul in torment . . .'

His voice was hot with passion now. His face seemed to be lit up with an internal flame and his bizarre eyes glowed with a yellow fire. He had cast away his cigarette and his fingers drummed a tattoo on the desk before him as though he were fighting to preserve his self-control. Numb with a feeling of utter helplessness, Jean sat and listened to that vibrating voice while the long fingers tapped and tapped.

'You Western women don't know what love is. I told you so that night, do you remember? You kiss and marry, bear children, and go to your graves without ever being stirred out of your infinite complacency. And yet you . . . *you* have the capacity for love. Your self-possession, your coldness — they're just a sham, a shield you hold up between your heart and the world. But you can't screen your eyes. And your eyes are hungry. You are starved for love . . .'

Slowly her courage was coming back to her. If only he would stay where he was! As long as the desk was

between them, she could keep calm. But not if he came nearer! If she saw those yellow eyes of his approaching her face, she thought her heart would stop beating. What did he want with her? What was he leading up to? And why did his fingers keep drumming . . . ?

She had let herself drift away on the current of her thoughts. What was he saying . . . ?

'. . . I have a motor-boat waiting at the foot of the rocks three minutes from here. It will take us to my yacht — she's in the roads of Golfe Juan with steam up. We'll go off cruising somewhere, just you and I together. What do you say?'

He stopped and looked at her, expectant. What was he proposing? Her heart began to thump: he had stood up: he was coming round the desk: now he had sat down on the settee beside her.

'If you want me to marry you, it can be arranged. We'll pick up a consul somewhere who'll do it for us. Jean, what do you say?'

'What . . . what do you want?' she said.

'Come away with me!'

She turned and stared at him. He tried to take her hand, but she snatched it away.

'Listen to me!' he pleaded. 'My proposal astonishes you, I know. But I've sworn to make you mine, Jean, and I never turn back from what I set out to do. I can make you happy. I have money. I will study you and . . . and . . . and . . . cherish you . . . and . . . and love you.' His voice went hoarse, and again he sought her hand. But she eluded him and, leaning back against the settee, burst into a peal of laughter. It was hysterical, the relaxation of strained nerves. But the man saw only that he was being ridiculed and his face changed.

'You must be crazy!' she said.

'What I have done to-night is madness, I know,' he answered, his eyes on her face, 'but love makes men mad. Jean, will you come away with me?'

She stood up, pale and trembling, but resolute.

'Is that what you wanted to say to me?'

'Yes!' he replied.

'May I go home now, please?'

His face darkened. His pupils were mere pin-points encircled in red.

'There is someone else, is that it?' he demanded, suddenly fierce. She shook her head. He caught her wrist.

'If I thought it was Cradock . . .'

'Mr. Cradock is nothing to me . . .'

'Are you sure?' he demanded. 'Who then was it that told him you were dining with me that night at the house of Osman el Maghraby? Who contrived his opportune appearance? Don't you realise that he has been merely using you to help him in his infernal spying for the police?'

She pulled her hand away. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' she said. 'I told Mr. Cradock nothing!'

'Jean,' he pleaded, and drew closer, 'put this ill-mannered boor out of your mind. If you say there's nothing between you, that's good enough for me. The motor-boat is waiting. Come away with me . . .'

'I am not going with you, Said Hussein.'

She was breathing hard and her slender hands were clenched.

'Is that your answer?'

'I'd rather give myself to your black servant!' she

flung at him scathingly and sprang to her feet. 'Keep away from me!' she warned him.

She snatched up from the desk the glass of champagne, the only weapon to her hand. The wine splashed her arm as she raised the glass to throw. But Hussein came on and she flung it in his face. He laughed as he warded it off with his arm and it shivered into fragments on the edge of the desk. He sprang at her, eyes aflame, face distorted.

'I've an hour to spare for love . . . and for you, you beautiful thing!' he muttered hoarsely as he grappled with her. His arms were round her now, plucking her wrap away. His breath was hot on her cheek and his fingers tore at her shoulder-straps.

And then, from somewhere within the silent house resounded an ominous crash.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE RECKONING

At the sound Said Hussein's arms abruptly relaxed their grip. He stepped back in alarm and stood listening. There was a moment of tense hush. Then both of them — Hussein, perplexed and watchful, in the centre of the floor, Jean, almost fainting against the wall — heard the staircase without creak beneath a firm footstep.

Hussein lost no time. He darted behind the desk and plucked open the door that broke the line of bookshelves. To her amazement Jean saw him suddenly reel backwards before the sturdy figure of a man in black, a bowler on his head, a revolver in his big red fist, who pushed resolutely into the room. At the same moment from the other door a deep voice sent a thrill to her heart.

'Are you all right?' it asked.

David Cradock had entered from the staircase.

At once his eyes had sought Jean in her corner. He saw her with the tears yet wet on her face that was as white as her frock, her eyes wide with terror, one hand holding up her corsage that, rent across, set free a white and gleaming shoulder. Even as he gazed at her, the anguish faded from her eyes, the colour flew back to her cheeks, and she smiled at him as bravely as she could across the disordered room.

For now she knew beyond all doubt that this was her man. Not Said Hussein, clawing with ghastly face at his

hip pocket as he stumbled back into the room, not the broken glass, not the wine spilled upon the carpet, had claimed David Cradock's first glance. It was she. Gone were the indecision, the doubts and fears, the vacillations and the probings of so many weary weeks. As their eyes met, she knew that the soothsayer had spoken true. She had reached the end of her journey and the name of her resting-place was peace. Worn out with suspense, trembling between laughter and tears, she stood and smiled her love for him out of her eyes. And when he saw that smile, his grave features lightened and he turned his attention to the room.

Said Hussein had staggered back against the desk. His hands were now raised above his head. Ten paces away the man in the bowler covered him with his revolver while his eyes darted quick glances about the study.

'I shouldn't make a fuss if I were you, Hussein,' Cradock remarked, advancing to the desk. 'Makhmoud is lying below in the hall with a bullet through the thigh. He was troublesome, and my friend here, Inspector Ardisson, of the Cannes police, had to deal with him. And your Mr. Voronian — if that's his name — has made off in a motor-boat. Have you got those handcuffs, Inspector? I shall shoot you if you try any tricks, Hussein,' he added, and displayed an automatic that his broad hand had almost concealed.

The man in the bowler hat advanced, laid his revolver on the desk, and whisked something that clinked out of the pocket of his tail-coat. '*Bas les mains!*' he rapped out. Silently Hussein lowered his hands. There was a click. '*Et voilà!*' announced the Inspector.

Slowly the Prince raised his head and looked at Cradock.

'Something out of your line, surely?' he sneered. 'I didn't know you had joined the police. Am I the attraction? Or is it the lady?'

'I've been after you for a long time,' Cradock curtly rejoined. 'But I've got you at last . . . Mr. Ramosi!'

Hussein raised his eyebrows. 'What was the name?' he said.

'Don't play the fool, Hussein,' Cradock retorted. 'The game's up, and you know it. The Cairo police have discovered your *cache* of stolen antiquities.'

'Really? You have, of course, convincing evidence that they are stolen?'

'We have. The statuette of Anubis, for one thing. And a witness, for another, who saw it in your possession!'

The Prince looked up quickly. His eyes were full of hate.

'By Gad, Cradock,' he muttered, 'you waited a long time to get your own back. But you've got it at last. However,' he added, reverting to his tone of raillery, 'I trust that, for your own sake, you've got more creditable witnesses than Nadia Alexandrovna. And, incidentally, I wonder very much whether a charge such as this entitles you to raid my house and handcuff me . . .'

'It is not the only charge, Said Hussein.'

The red eyes flickered an upward glance at the Englishman. 'If this conversation is to be prolonged, Cradock,' he said with a somewhat exaggerated display of nonchalance, 'I should like to sit down — that is, if your excitable French friend with the gun has no objection.'

He dropped into the chair at the desk.

'Do you remember Seaton, Hussein?' Cradock demanded.

'I never heard of him!'

'Yet you met him in this house, in this very room, not two months ago!'

'I don't know what you're talking about!'

'Seaton was found dead in a telephone-box at a Monte Carlo restaurant two days after that meeting. They said it was suicide. But I think it was murder. Shall I tell you why? Because a private detective, a man called Mayer, whom Seaton had put on your track, had identified you as Ramosi and had rung up Seaton to tell him so. Seaton was assassinated by you or one of your agents. Mayer disappeared. I think he was murdered, too, though his body has never been found.'

Hussein's face was as hard as granite.

'My poor Cradock,' he remarked, 'you are taking your new profession far too seriously. What's all this rot about Seaton and Mayer and Ramosi, people I have never even heard of? . . .'

'And Simonou?' Cradock leaned forward a little

The Prince's features were livid; but perhaps it was the mauve light.

'A most objectionable Greek!' observed Hussein.

'Poisoned by you when you feared that he had become suspect,' Cradock's deep voice interjected.

'My dear fellow, you're romancing . . .'

'The janitor at Osman el Maghraby's house has confessed,' Cradock rapped out. 'He helped Makhmoud to prepare the poisoned coffee.'

Hussein moved his brindled head uneasily.

'These Egyptians,' he said, rather hoarsely, 'will say anything they think the police want to hear . . .'

'The witness who saw you hand Simonou the poisoned coffee is not an Egyptian, Said Hussein!'

The Prince stirred restlessly. The light caught his white forehead and showed it gleaming with moisture.

'Bah!' he said slowly. 'If it is true, as you say, that Simonou has been poisoned . . .'

'The body has been recovered, Said Hussein!'

The man stopped fidgeting on the instant. Like a statue he sat in his chair staring before him. Then he turned half round to Cradock.

'Of course you can prove that it was this particular cup of coffee that killed Simonou, eh? And that I knew it was poisoned? Tchah! Everyone in Egypt drinks coffee all day long, you know that! And it is the land of private vengeances . . .'

Forgetting that he was manacled, he sought to make an explanatory gesture with his right hand. But he dragged his left hand with it so that, with his two arms extended, he seemed to be in an attitude of supplication.

'You're right, Said Hussein, it is.' Cradock paused. Then the stern, pitiless voice went on. 'And Ismail?'

For the first time the Prince swung right round and looked Cradock straight in the face. His colour was horrible and there were purple blotches under his eyes.

'And Ismail?' Cradock asked again.

Hussein began to laugh. But his laughter was shrill and strident and lacked spontaneity. It died away in silence under the grave regard of the two men and the woman who were watching him.

'Ismail? What Ismail? Everybody in Egypt is called Ismail! . . .' Hussein demanded in a voice that was shrillish and not quite under control.

'Ismail, the art dealer from Paris, who disappeared on board the Aquatic,' Cradock answered him.

'Ridiculous!' promptly vociferated Hussein. He spoke boldly enough, but his eyes were uneasy. 'Why, you and I were together when Ismail jumped overboard!'

'Ah! And how do you know the exact time of Ismail's disappearance?' The question was rapped out sharply.

Hussein hesitated. 'I don't,' he said presently. 'It was current gossip on the boat that he disappeared about midnight.'

'Then you had nothing to do with the murder of this man?'

The Prince moved his hands and his fetters rattled.

'My dear fellow, when I left you on A deck, I went down with the wireless operator and remained chatting for a few minutes at the door of my cabin. When he left me, I went to bed and did not come out of my room until breakfast time. Find this operator and ask him. He will confirm what I say . . . '

'I am not suggesting that you killed Ismail yourself!' Cradock observed evenly.

Hussein seemed to go rigid. His head was bent, but his curious eyes darted quick glances from right to left like an animal at bay.

'I'll repeat my question,' Cradock announced. 'You declare that you had nothing to do with the murder of this man?'

'I know nothing about it!' Hussein declared doggedly.

Cradock made a sign to the French inspector. The latter moved quietly to the door behind the desk and opened it. The sound caught Hussein's attention and he swung round in the chair to face the door. His eyes were dilated, his face was discoloured, and his mouth

worked. There was something terrifying about his attitude of rigid tension that sent cold shivers rippling down Jean's spine. She felt her eyes drawn to the door where the stocky form of the French detective was visible beckoning. There was a moment of almost unendurable suspense, then the inspector stepped back and a small brown man appeared in the doorway.

It was Ismail.

He seemed frailer and more insignificant than ever, paler, too, and less brown than he had been on the Aquatic. He came slowly into the room, his large black eyes fixed on the man in the chair. Prince Said Hussein spoke no word, made no sign. He remained staring with his head thrown back, his livid face shining in the dim light.

'By your order, Said Hussein,' said Cradock, breaking the stagnant hush that had fallen upon the room, 'your servant, Makhmoud, knifed this man on C deck of the Aquatic and threw him into the sea. But your luck was out that night. The point of the dagger was turned by Ismail's braces and it missed any vital part. Ismail is a good swimmer and, despite the heavy seas, he kept himself afloat for more than an hour until he was picked up by a Corsican tartane and taken to Algiers. From there he returned to Paris and, through fear, said nothing of his adventure. It was only the enquiries we made after your flight from Cairo that discovered Ismail's return to life. Shall I tell you now why you wanted to get rid of him? It was for the same reason as in Seaton's case. Ismail had identified you with Mr. Ramosi!'

'Yes,' cried Ismail in a voice that vibrated with passion as he thrust himself forward. 'That night, at

the meeting here, in this room, I noticed the mutilation of your right hand. And then, on that evening of storm on board the great ship, as I was sitting in the *fumoir*, a man drank alone at the table opposite who, like you, had a joint of the small finger of the right hand missing. I looked again and knew you for the man of the Villa Scarabée. At the meeting in this room you looked different. Your hair, it was dark, and spectacles hid your eyes, but I recognised you. I knew your voice again. And I was afraid. I remembered your threats to Seaton and Simonou's warning that we should not seek to find out the secret of Ramosi.

'From the passenger list I had just discovered that Meestair Ceradock was on board. Meestair Ceradock has always been my friend. I knew that he would help me and tell me what to do. I sought for him in his cabin and about the ship. But I could not find him. Until I had seen him I was too frightened to go to my cabin, so I walked on the deck waiting for him to come; for I had left a note to tell him where I was.'

'And then I saw you descend with an officer in a gold cap. I hid myself behind a boat as you passed; but afterwards I realised that you must have seen me, for you made a gesture . . . so! . . . with your hand. What it meant I did not know, until, in a little, as I leaned on the rail, someone struck me from behind, seized me by the arms and lifted me up. I cried out, but already my body was half over the side. As I fell I saw a dark face looking down at me, the face of a Berberi. Ah! *Ibn el kalb* . . .' He burst into a flood of raging Arabic.

Cradock laid his hand on the shoulder of the little man and checked him. He turned to the Prince.

'Have you anything to say, Said Hussein?'

The man in the chair was silent.

Cradock looked across at Ardisson. 'If you have been able to follow what has been said . . .' he began.

'But yes,' the inspector broke in. 'I understand very well English.'

'I wanted to satisfy you,' Cradock continued, 'that this man is a dangerous malefactor. I had intended to delay his arrest until the arrival of the two detectives who are now on their way here from Cairo with the papers in the case. But, in view of the fact that this man has kidnapped this lady, if I am not mistaken, and detained her here against her will, and in the light of Ismail's written deposition which I have given you, I felt justified in asking you to arrest Said Hussein at once and hold him against extradition proceedings. Do you agree?'

'My God, yes,' replied the inspector idiomatically. 'A type like this one, he fits in a jail like a pea in its case, *allez!*'

'Then you'd better take him away, hadn't you?'

'We'll search him first,' the Frenchman suggested. Expertly his big red hands ran over the prisoner. He sat, as they had left him, motionless in his chair and submitted silently to the perquisition. A bulging pocketbook, a cigar-case, a bunch of keys, a knife fell in succession upon the blotting-pad. A loaded automatic from the hip pocket joined them presently.

'*Allez ouste!*' commanded the detective and, jerking Hussein erect, thrust him towards the door. As Ardisson took a pace forward, something crunched under his foot.

'*Tiens!*' he said and stopped. '*C'est du verre, ça!*'

Cradock pointed to the shivered stem of the cham-

pagne glass lying on the carpet by the desk. Ardisson brushed some fragments of glass from his fingers. '*En effet!*' he remarked. Then, addressing the prisoner, '*Remuez-vous un peu, mon vieux, et vivement, n'est-ce pas?*'

As the Prince was passing by Jean, he paused and looked at her. There was an inscrutable smile on his lips.

'My old nurse was right after all,' he said. 'But are you the woman? Or is it Nadia?'

But Ardisson drove him on. '*En avant!*' he ordered, and they passed out together, Ismail in their wake.

Cradock stood for a moment, gazing after the manacled figure. 'What did he mean by that?' he said.

'It was a prophecy,' Jean replied. 'He was once told that he would meet his death through a woman in the sign of the Ram.'

'In the sign of the Ram?' Cradock repeated, and was silent. Then he picked up Jean's wrap from the ground and folded it about her. 'Thank God, you're safe, my dear!' he said, gazing into her eyes. 'What did that swine want with you?'

'Don't let's talk about him,' she answered with a little shudder. 'How did you find me here?'

'There's an empty villa at the back. Ardisson and I have been living there in secret for the past five days, taking it in turns to watch this house. I was lying out behind the drive this evening and saw you arrive. Ardisson had gone into Cannes for half an hour in the car, and I had to wait until he returned as I didn't want to make a mess of things!'

A hoarse voice from below called out suddenly: 'Monsieur! Monsieur!' But Cradock paid no attention. He was all eagerness for Jean. 'How did *you* come to

Cannes?' he asked her. A wave of red swept over her pale face. Again the voice from below cried: 'Monsieur!'

Jean's eyes were hidden under the long brown lashes. She twisted her handkerchief in her fingers. 'I wanted . . .' she began and stopped. 'I wanted . . . I thought I ought . . . to see you again!'

His face was close to hers now, but she turned her head away. He put his hands on her shoulders and gently drew her to him. 'Jean . . .' he whispered fearfully. 'Jean . . . !' She raised her eyes and looked at him and in her face he saw surrender.

But at that moment the door was burst open violently. A policeman in uniform stood on the threshold. Jean sprang back.

'Monsieur, you must come at once!' he said to Cradock.

David's eyes smiled at Jean as his shoulders went up in a little shrug. 'I shan't be a moment!' he promised and swiftly followed the policeman from the room.

Jean went to the window and looked out. There was a car at the door, although she could not see it, for a vivid glare picked out a segment of bright green palms from the surrounding blackness of the garden. In the light the slanting spearheads of a heavy rain-shower glistened. Presently above the rustle of the rain she heard the murmur of voices, the measured tramp of feet in the hall below. Then the door to the staircase landing opened and David appeared. He seemed to be ill at ease.

'There's a car outside,' he said. 'We're going to drive you home.' She gathered her cloak about her and they went downstairs together in silence.

The lamp in the porch was burning. There was no

sign of Ardisson and his charge. Outside in the streaming rain loomed the black shape of a big open car. A uniformed policeman stood at the bonnet and filled the radiator from a can of water. They halted under the porch for a minute and watched him.

'Must give the machine a drink,' he remarked cheerfully as he saw them. 'She heats up and down these hills and she's been travelling to-night. *Un petit instant, M'sieu, Dame, on est à vous!*'

The water gurgled in the radiator and the rain pattered down. The man put his can on the gravel and began to screw on the radiator cap to which a mascot, a shining silvered thing, was bolted. Its white metal gleamed brightly in the beam of the side-lamps.

Jean laid a hand on David's arm. 'Oh, look!' she whispered in an awed voice.

The mascot was a ram's head.

'I know,' he returned. 'I thought of that when you told me of the prophecy. Jean . . .' He stopped and his blue eyes searched her face.

'What is it?' she asked with a premonition of fear.

'Hussein is dead!'

'Dead?'

David bowed his head.

'He must have had a phial in his pocket,' he answered. 'He's poisoned himself.'

CHAPTER XXIX

'. . . LIKE SUNSHINE AFTER RAIN'

In a sheltered corner of the spacious gardens of the Bella Vista a solitary bench faces a 'V' of blue sky and bluer ocean skilfully hewn out of the encircling pines. It is an unfrequented spot, for it lies beyond the tennis courts, the limit of exploration for most visitors to the hotel, the high lichen-grey wall of the garden on one side, in front a deep drop over rock to the road below. The old pines shield it from the mistral and its southern aspect endows it with the sun. On the greyest days, if there is a ray of sunshine anywhere, it is to this quiet nook that the sunbeams repair. The mild air is perfumed with resin and drowsy with the drone of bees; and on the flat rocks that thrust their venerable heads out of the surrounding banks of turf the little lizards with their watchful eyes stretch themselves on the warm stone.

The rainstorm through which David Cradock had driven Jean Averil home from the Villa Scarabée had lasted all through the night and far into the morning. But, noonday past, the sky had dried its eyes and presently the sun came out and overhung with diamonds each glittering bush and flower.

Jean Averil had discovered this sun-trap among the trees on the day of her arrival in Cannes. Its scented solitude had solaced some weary hours. She sat here now, the fragrance of the pines and the earthy reek of wet grass pleasant in her nostrils, the sun warm on her bare head, the sea glittering to the horizon before her

eyes, the birds calling from branch to branch — sat and waited for David.

The hour was four o'clock; but her thoughts pointed to five. For at five o'clock, David had said, he would be with her. Early that morning he had telephoned her. As she sat up in bed to answer, it was with indescribable emotion she heard his deep, calm voice coming over the wire. She lay propped up amongst her pillows with the light filtering through the shutters and let her mind dwell timidly on this thrill of hearing his voice at her bedside.

Had she slept? he asked her. A bit, she told him. Was she very tired after her adventure? Rather, she said. He must go to Nice at once, he explained, Ardisson insisting on dragging him off to the Prefecture on a matter of detail connected with the case. But he would be back at five. Might he come and see her then? He wanted to talk to her. Would she be at the hotel at five? Yes, she told him. 'Go to sleep again now,' he bade her, 'and dream that you're driving with me along the Antibes road.' A little humorous change crept into his voice as he added: 'Whether you dream or not, you'll be beside me all the time!' and then he had rung off.

A line remembered from some old school-book was dancing in her mind as she leaned back against the bench and watched the rain-drops glisten on the sober green of the pines. '*Love comforteth like sunshine after rain!*' Her spirit was at last at rest, basking in this newfound peace like the gleaming garden in the warm afternoon light. Who was this man who had blotted out the past for her? She didn't know or care. Had he any money? She had enough for both. Was she prepared to make her home in Egypt in that lonely house

under the mountain? She would live in a tomb, if so she could be with him. Did he love her? She thought he did. He had told her so that evening in Shepheard's garden.

But what if he had spoken only out of the passion of the moment, born of the splendour of the Egyptian night, of memories of the strange adventures they had been through together? He had accepted his dismissal when she had sent him away. And yet last night surely he had been about to speak . . .

David was not a man to change — she repeated her conviction to herself. He was as steadfast as his Theban hills. And she loved him: ah, yes! she loved him. That was her comfort, the sheet-anchor to which she clung. David would never fail her . . .

Love such as this she had never known before. If she had, maybe the shipwreck of her marriage might have been averted. The thought softened her heart towards Mark. She had never conceived the idea that she might have been in part to blame for his betrayal. But now love had opened her eyes and she knew it was the truth.

And then suddenly David was at her side. He must have come across the grass, noiseless in his white tennis shoes. He looked very trim in a blue jacket and white flannel trousers. He took off his hat and looked at her out of his grave eyes.

'You and I have got to have a talk,' he said. 'May I sit down?'

He was very matter-of-fact, she thought. Why didn't he take her in his arms as he would have done last night? Silently she made room for him beside her on the bench.

'You know absolutely nothing about me, do you?' he remarked, his eyes on the ground.

'Yes, I do,' she retorted. 'You're one of the Barrasfords and your brother was killed in the war.'

He looked up at her in surprise. 'That's right, as far as it goes,' he replied. 'But here's something else I want to tell you. My father and I have never got on very well since I left the Diplomatic, and he makes me an allowance of only five hundred pounds a year. He would do a great deal better than that, but he made a condition which I didn't want to accept. However, when he dies, as my only brother is dead, I come into the property, about twelve thousand a year and the title.'

She stared at him. 'What title?'

'But I thought you said you knew that my father was Barrasford,' he returned.

'Will you please explain?' she said.

'There's nothing to explain. My father's Lord Barrasford and . . . and . . . well, I'm his son!'

Dim memories of Debrett flitted through Jean's mind.

'Then,' she announced, 'why aren't you an Honourable?'

He grew rather embarrassed. 'Well . . . I am!' he answered.

'Then why don't you call yourself "Honourable"?'

'One doesn't, you know, except on letters and bills and things. Besides, living as I did, it was a bit of a nuisance. However, if I settle down in England, as I'm thinking of doing, I suppose I'll have to go back to it . . .'

'Are you going to leave Egypt?' she asked.

He was silent for a minute. Then he blurted out: 'If I accept my father's condition, I can.'

He kept his head down; but the tips of his ears were red.

'Am I allowed to know what this condition is? Or is it a secret?' she asked.

He did not look up.

'There's no heir to the title,' he said, rather hurriedly. 'And my father has been urging me for years to marry. I have always refused . . . until now.'

She smiled and, though her eyes danced with mischief, her face was serenely beautiful.

'And have you now decided to marry?' she asked delicately.

There was a silence; then he raised his head. He turned and looked at her, hungrily, timorously. She met his gaze unflinchingly and spoke no word. Then his arms went about her and with a little sigh she surrendered to his kiss.

'Why . . . why didn't you do this when you first came into the garden?' she said in a low voice.

'Because,' he answered, rather bashfully, 'I had to tell you something about myself.'

'You knew nothing about me!'

'I have you,' he told her simply, 'and that's enough!'

She laid her cheek against his. 'And I have you,' she answered. 'And that would have been enough for me. I could have shaken you, David, as you sat there, wasting time. To propose to a woman by talking to her about your heirs is what I call putting the cart before the horse. Suppose I'd said "no"!'

'Jean!' . . . he pleaded.

Thereafter so great a silence fell upon the nook among the pines that the little lizards, with their gimlet eyes, came out and ran unaffrighted over the stones.

THE END

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